

LEGACY'S END  
THE SILENT FORCE

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## Dramatis Personae

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AG-37, assassin droid

Jaao Assam, former Imperial Knight (human male)

Deliah Blue, mechanic (Zeltron female)

Morrigan Corde, ex-intelligence agent (human female)

Marasiah Fel, empress (human female)

Eli Horn, Sith apprentice (human male)

Kyra, junkyard owner (human female)

Darth Maladi, Sith Lord (Devaronian female)

R2-D2, astromech droid

Azlyn Rae, Imperial Knight (human female)

Rav, pirate (Feeorin male)

Sauk, refugee (Mon Cal male)

Cade Skywalker, Jedi Knight (human male)

Ania Solo, fringer (human female)

Jariah Syn, weapons expert (human male)

Darth Talon, Sith Lord (Twi'lek female)

Shado Vao, Jedi Master (Twi'lek male)

Gunner Yage, fighter pilot (human female)



## Prelude: A Long Time Ago...

The planet called Te Hasa appeared a lonely one. No moons swung around it and no cities could be seen marking its dusty yellow-orange face. A single spacecraft, elegant and long-bodied like a silver needle, fell out of hyperspace toward the planet.

Strapped in his starship's cockpit, the pilot tapped his comm console and broadcast his security clearance to the surveillance devices in orbit. Free to pass, the needle-shaped ship plunged into Te Hasa's atmosphere, leaving a narrow trail of friction-flame in its wake. After dropping closer to the surface it levelled out above an endless sprawl of sandy plains, interrupted occasionally by juts of red-stone mountains, brown trails of long-dried riverbeds, and the crumbling ruins of long-dead cities.

Finally the ship found its destination inside the heart of the kilometer-deep canyon that wound through the desert like a trailing knife-wound. It set down on one of two landing pads jutting from the steep red-stone wall and a moment later the pilot stepped outside. The tall, bulbous-headed Bith wore a breathing mask over the lowest portion of his face, protecting him from Te Hasa's methane-rich atmosphere. The Bith took long strides toward the sealed metal door placed in the cliff-side and didn't falter to see the two beings waiting for him on either side of the portal. In a galaxy filled with two-armed, two-legged, roughly Bith-shaped aliens, the Gree were an exception. Each creature was planted to the ground by four

thick green tentacles while two more were wrapped around robe-draped torsos like arms. Their oblong heads possessed pairs of large, all-black eyes while a brain sac dangled halfway down their backs. Metal sheaths were wrapped around the lower half of their faces, obscuring the layered flaps of skin used for respiration and vocalization.

The Gree on the right, called Kavont'k, waved two tentacles in greeting and squealed into its face-sheath. A cold mechanical voice translated, "Welcome back, Darth Tenebrous."

The Sith Lord gave each Gree a curt nod and stepped through the portal. The Gree slithered behind on their snaking tentacles and followed him down the rock-carved hall that led deeper into the facility. Once inside Tenebrous removed his mask and breathed the filtered oxygen that pumped through most of the underground chambers.

"Has the master been informed of my arrival?" Tenebrous asked.

The Gree called Rakat'l said, "He is waiting for you in the laboratory."

Of course he would be, Tenebrous thought sourly. While the apprentice traversed the galaxy, secretly doing Sith business in the guise of his profane identity, starship designer Rugess Nome, his master rarely left his secluded research center. When Darth Bane had envisioned the Rule of Two over eight hundred years ago, he'd imagined master and apprentice fiercely pushing each other to loftier ambitions, not this.

It was sad in a way, but Tenebrous tried not to feel pity. It would make it harder to do what had to be done now.

This facility on Te Hasa was as secret as any place in the galaxy, made possible only by critical connections and hidden funds. The Gree were an incredibly ancient and notoriously isolationist race. This place had been constructed and staffed by Rakat'l, Kavont'k, and a handful of other natives whose services Darth Acheron had purchased decades ago. Gree were a long-lived race, with individual lifespans lasting nearly a millennium, and in theory they could guard this place for centuries to come.



Darth Tenebrous traced the familiar path to his master's laboratory and stopped before going in. He looked over his shoulder to Rakat'l and Kavont'k; he could make out nothing in their half-hidden, so-alien faces, and when he tried to search them in the Force he barely felt their presence. According to Acheron the Gree, as a race, had apparently lost their ability to use the Force tens of millennia ago. His master had a theory about that, but nowadays the old Twi'lek had theories about everything, right or wrong, and Tenebrous didn't bother to keep track of them all.

"You may go about your business," the Sith told them. "I will speak to the master alone."

The Gree waved tentacles in front of their torsos, a respectful gesture, then turned and slithered down the hall. Tenebrous watched them go, waited, and pushed his thoughts to the back of his mind, where even his master would not be able to read them. Then, finally, he opened the door and stepped into Darth Acheron's lair.

As a Bith, he came from a culture with the utmost respect for science. As an engineer famous galaxy-wide for designing custom spacecraft for ultra-rich clients, he knew the value of testing every method and honing every piece of your machine. Yet it seemed to him that what Darth Acheron was doing on Te Hasa, and had been doing for over a decade, approached the pedantic. Tenebrous stepped across the metal-grate floor, passing rows of transparisteel cannisters where bodies bobbed in liquid. Next he passed through a narrow hallway walled on either side by creatures trapped in cages. Some were living, some dead. Sentient and non-sentient lifeforms from across the galaxy had been gathered in Darth Acheron's menagerie. As he neared the end of the hallway Tenebrous paused for just a moment to look at another Bith, naked and curled up knees to chest, shivering in pain behind a glass wall. Her all-black eyes found his and implored. The Sith Lord walked on, into the next section of the laboratory.

Darth Acheron's favorite chamber had been bored straight down into Te Hasa's crust. The rough stone walls of the well had a diameter ten meters wide, and Tenebrous stepped carefully down the spiraling metal walkway that corkscrewed

down its outer edge. As he walked he passed more containers keeping pieces of past test subjects, shelves full of notes written on arcane parchment, barbed and pointed tools crusted with dried blood from dozens of different species.

When he reached the bottom of the spiraling ramp, three full rotations from where he'd entered, Tenebrous found his master standing over a blood-splattered surgical table on which the body of a human child lay cooling. Tenebrous' boots sounded on the grated floor, and with a rustle of black robes Darth Acheron turned from his test subject to fix his apprentice with a one-eyed stare. His left eye, and most of that side of his face, had been scarred since before he'd taken Tenebrous as his apprentice. Acheron's remaining eye was small but piercing, the same yellow color as the Twi'lek's wrinkled skin and drooping lekku. The same, too, as the pointed teeth he bared in a smile.

"Welcome back, apprentice," Acheron said. "I've been waiting for you. I trust you've finished the work you needed to do."

Tenebrous nodded; he'd been on no Sith business this time, only finalizing designs for several custom starships and starting the manufacturing process. He looked down at the dead child on the table. "I see you've been experimenting without me."

"Indeed. The Jedi sent a delegation to Dubrillion. They brought several padawans with them. It wasn't so hard to steal one away."

"We've tested the virus on Jedi before. And children."

"Yes, but never a padawan this young and unformed." Acheron looked at the brown-haired human boy almost fondly. "Nor one with as high a midi-chlorian count as this."

"Did you learn anything?"

Acheron's smile wilted. "The higher the midi-chlorian count, the faster the subject dies. Level of training in the Jedi arts is unrelated to the efficacy of the virus."

Tenebrous had already gathered as much from all their years of experimentation. Acheron's goal for over a decade had been to develop an artificial disease that would do the Sith's work for them. The weapon he and Tenebrous had created could survive among hosts from nearly all sentient

species and was easily passed on the air between them. Once taken into the respiratory system it seeped into the body, attacked midi-chlorians, and destroyed them. With midi-chlorians dead the host body died, and the more midi-chlorians in the host, the faster the death.

“The incubation period for the virus seems to be longer for younger beings,” Acheron observed. “This could be useful in disseminating the virus. This one lasted almost two weeks before showing signs. Once it did, death came within hours.”

One of the Twi’lek’s biggest worries was that the Jedi would realize a disease was targeting their midi-chlorians and react accordingly, quarantining themselves until a counter-agent could be found. A valid concern, to be sure, but not the one that weighed on Tenebrous. As far as he was concerned only one thing mattered about Acheron’s virus, one thing that would make or break their decades-long enterprise.

“You wanted a child because it did not belong fully to either the light or dark sides of the Force,” Tenebrous surmised. “Did that effect your findings?”

Acheron’s response was a sigh, and Tenebrous knew what that meant. For almost twenty years they’d perfected strain after strain of the virus, testing it on live subjects ranging from kidnapped Jedi to untrained Force-sensitive strays. Thrice they’d captured young adults with high mid-chlorian counts and trained them for years in the ways of the dark side, with the express goal of testing the virus on them. All three subjects had died. A bio-weapon that targeted all Force-users would harm the Sith as much as the Jedi; worse, as there were only two Sith in existence, while Jedi infected the galaxy by the thousands. The virus would only be useful if it targeted light-side users alone, but despite two decades of experimentation, Acheron had made no progress. For midi-chlorians, there seemed to be no difference between drawing on the Force’s opposite sides.

“This young one drew on the Force in its most inchoate form,” said Acheron. “I... experimented on him, drawing him toward the light and dark. Neither made any change in the virus’ behavior.”

Of course not, Tenebrous thought. Two decades wasted, when they should have been progressing Bane's Grand Design through other means. Darth Acheron was over a century old, and in his younger years he'd been a power that had left Tenebrous in awe. Acheron had killed his own master at a mere twenty standard years and had slain Jedi on three separate occasions, all the while hiding his presence from the Jedi Council on Coruscant. As a xenanthropologist scholar, polylinguist, and member of the Republic's diplomatic corps he'd travelled to every charted sector of the galaxy, quietly building a network of allies. He'd even wooed the most-secretive Gree who hosted him now.

Most impressive of all, however, was the permanent mark he'd left in the Force. After joining a commercial starliner making a pleasure cruise through the Oseon system, Acheron had overpowered the crew and wrecked the ship on an uncharted planetoid while keeping the passengers alive. Acheron had spent a month on that world, killing each passenger one-by-one, using their successive agonies to fuel his life-essence as he spread it across the galaxy and touched the very whole of the Force. By the end of that month he'd been starved and wasted, every last passenger on that starliner dead, but their sacrifices had allowed him to access untold power. Using their borrowed strength and his own cruel determination, Acheron had rendered a hole in the fabric of the Force, afflicting the Jedi scattered galaxy-wide with some of his own dark anger and sending shockwaves of apprehension through their Order.

A long time ago, Tenebrous had felt honored to serve him.

"With every experiment we learn a little more." The old Twi'lek stroked the dead child's head, mussing its hair. "And I think other possibilities are opening to us."

Tenebrous didn't allow himself to hope Acheron might end this fruitless quest. "What possibilities?"

"Come, my apprentice." Acheron wagged a clawed finger.

He hobbled away from the vivisection table and up the corkscrewing walkway. The Bith followed his master past the hall with the glassed-off cells, where the captive Bith still shuddered. They went through the long room with bodies preserved in liquid containers and finally into the chamber

where Acheron kept his library. The Gree were the most ancient civilization still extant in the galaxy today, and though they'd fallen very far from their peak, the half-ruined archives on Te Hasa contained more information on ancient galactic history than anyplace else, even the Jedi Temple on Coruscant- so long as one could read the various Gree languages they'd been written in, and Acheron was one of at most a dozen non-Gree in the entire galaxy who could do that. The tablets, parchments, and bound tomes that filled Acheron's library were gibberish to Tenebrous, but his master shifted through them with the familiarity of someone who'd already memorized half their contents.

"Consider the Rakata," Acheron said. "Ancient history to us, but once contemporaries of the Gree. And if their records are to be believed, it was the Rakatan Infinite Empire that broke the Gree and forced them to retreat back to this scrap of space. They were a naturally Force-powerful race, and they embraced its dark side to fuel their war machine and conquer system after system."

Tenebrous had heard all this before. "If records from twenty-five or thirty thousand years ago can be trusted," he said skeptically.

"Gree live almost ten times longer than Twi'leks or Bith. History passes slowly for them. That's why their records are so invaluable. When it comes to the downfall of the Rakata, the sources lay different claims, but not necessarily ones that contradict. Some say the Rakata fell because of a civil war, others that they were broken by the arrival of new Force-users, possibly early Jedi. Also, it was said that a great disease ravaged the Rakata, killing many of them and severing their connection to the Force."

Tenebrous understood now, but he warned, "You said it's just one story among many, and the Rakata have been extinct for over twenty millennia."

"Yes, but secrets may remain. It's possible the Rakata were ruined by a plague that rendered midi-chlorians mute without destroying them entirely and killing the host body. I must spend more time working in the Gree archives to be sure."

Tenebrous heard the certainty in his master's voice and felt a flush of disappointment. He'd already decided what needed

to be done and inwardly committed himself to the act; still a small part, a weak part, a very un-Sith-like part, had been hoping some fruit might come of Darth Acheron's final labors and give reason to spare the once-great Dark Lord.

Oblivious to his apprentice's thoughts, Acheron continued, "I've uncovered more interesting hints. We know the Rakata were Force-sensitive to an extent unheard of in modern races. It was not just rare individuals who could use the Force; *all* of them could. But I've also found suggestions that the Force was once widespread among the Gree, though they referred to its touch in archaic theological terms. There is suggestion that Force-sensitivity was also universal for the ancient Kwa, who predated even the Gree and Rakata."

Tenebrous edged closer, feigning interest so the old Twi'lek would sink deeper into distraction. "What does all this mean? That the Force was once more common than it is now?"

"Yes. And we must wonder why." Acheron looked down at the scrolls. "It's tragic we cannot sample the genes of those ancient races, examine their midi-chlorians and find what separated them from us. Now we must wonder why the Force touches sentients today so rarely."

"Perhaps the disease that struck the Rakata mutated to affect other life-forms and limit their Force connection."

"Yes. I have thought of that. And yet... I wonder if the Force is not acting of its own volition, withdrawing its power from us."

That took Tenebrous by surprise, and he froze beside his master. "Is such a thing possible?"

"You have not touched the Force as deeply as I have." Acheron's yellow eye turned toward Tenebrous. "When I wrenched that hole in its fabric and enacted my will upon it, I could feel some power working against me. It was not like any sentient mind I've ever felt. It was far, far greater... The Jedi talk of the Force having a will, a consciousness."

"The Force is a source of power. *Our* power," Tenebrous said. He hadn't realized his master was so far gone. "To say it has a will of its own, a sentience, is pabulum the Jedi peddle to excuse their own weakness."

"Perhaps..." Acheron looked down in thought. "But you did not feel that strength. There is *something* to what the Jedi

say. I am certain of it. Perhaps that will have been foiling my research... I wonder if we haven't been taking the wrong approach for all these years..."

Enough. Tenebrous reached into his robe and plucked his lightsaber from his belt. He barely had to shift it in his hand before he tapped the button and sent a spear of humming red light through Acheron's flank, under his armpit, through lungs and heart. A tiny gasp escaped the Twi'lek's mouth. He managed to twist his head and his eye locked on Tenebrous. Lips peeled back from yellow teeth and his mouth opened a little wider, and for one awful moment it seemed like Acheron was laughing.

Then Tenebrous shut off his lightsaber. The old body tipped to one side and toppled to the floor in a messy tangle of sprawled limbs, withered yellow lekku and black robes.

Darth Tenebrous stared at the body of his master, shocked breathless by how easy it had been. His heart was pounding in his chest. He half-expected Acheron to spring back upright, like a puppet lifted by strings, but he lay there, chest still. Tenebrous reached out with the Force for some lingering trace of his master's life but found nothing except a dark, hollow place.

Just to be sure, Tenebrous stepped over to the body and kicked it once in the chest. Nothing.

The Bith slumped against the table, almost knocking some of his master's precious archives off. It was done; he had fulfilled the fate of all Sith and surpassed his master. Now he would have to find an apprentice of his own to train and to use, and perhaps be used by in turn. He'd helped Acheron train dark acolytes for the sole purpose of using them as test subjects; he had no doubt he could teach a real apprentice on his own.

The apprentice would be his to mold; so would the future of Bane's Grand Design. Tenebrous felt lightheaded, dizzy from his success and all the possibilities that had suddenly opened before him. He wouldn't waste a single day more on Acheron's misguided virus scheme, nor would he seclude himself on Te Hasa, pouring over archaic tomes.

Yet as he looked around the room and considered the body of his master, Tenebrous admitted that there had been some

virtue to Acheron's obsessions. Sith did not run from knowledge, they embraced it and used it. Genetic manipulation of midi-chlorians could yet hold promise; so, too, could all the ancient half-factual tales in these accumulated Gree texts. Acheron's fatal error had not been his interests, merely that he'd pursued them to the exclusion of all else.

Tenebrous thought on that for a time, and when he was ready he touched the communications panel by the door and called for a servant.

Rakat'l appeared a minute later, slinking into the room on writhing tentacles. When its blank eyes rested on Darth Acheron's corpse it gave no sound, betrayed nothing in the Force.

"The Dark Lord is dead," Tenebrous said simply. "I am your master now."

Rakat'l made a low hiss beneath its breath-mask. The tinny translator's voice said, "What would you have us do, Master Tenebrous?"

"Dispose of the body. Burn it. I will be going soon, but I'll return from time to time. You'll continue to receive the standard payment for your services. Master Acheron's experiments are to be kept on hiatus. Continue monitoring and feeding his test subjects. If some die, dispose of those bodies too."

"It will be done, Master." Rakat'l's two arm-tentacles writhed in obedience.

Tenebrous gestured to the library's piled tomes. "While I am gone, I want you and your staff to translate these volumes into Basic."

Rakat'l made a high-pitched squeal. Its translator said, "Which volumes?"

"All of them. Prioritize the ones most referenced by Master Acheron. Can you do that?"

He sensed some hesitation from the Gree. Rakat'l said, "These archives are written in six distinct languages that have all gone extinct."

Tenebrous felt an involuntary stab of admiration for his master. "Can they be translated?"

"It will take time, Master."



“Then you should get started as soon as you can. As long as you continue to receive payment, you’ll continue to work. I’ll check on your progress from time to time, but I won’t be taking up residence here like Acheron. Do you understand?”

“We understand.” Rakat’l raised his tentacles again.

“I’m glad,” Tenebrous said.

He walked swiftly for the door, deftly stepping around Rakat’l’s tentacles on his way out of the chamber. Once clear he strode out the laboratory, down the long rock-carved hall, back to the landing platform where his ship was waiting. He’d done what he’d come here to do and ended his master’s foolishness. Now it was up to him to redirect the Grand Design to a more fruitful path, and to train an apprentice fit to carry on the legacy of the Sith. When Tenebrous stepped outside his head was lifted high in anticipation. The future was waiting to be made.



## PART I



## RESTITUTION



## Chapter One

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They'd barely gotten off the ground when things started going wrong. *Free Agent* was pushing out from Christophsis's biggest starport, angling skyward and pushing toward the upper atmosphere, when another starship appeared directly behind them and began to hail.

"Somebody seems impatient," Ania Solo muttered. The slim black-haired young woman, strapped in the co-pilot's seat, reached over to the comm console and opened the transmission.

Before she could say anything, a harsh voice crackled, "This is planetary security! You are carrying illegal cargo and are ordered to set down immediately!"

That was news to Ania. She looked to the ship's pilot and asked, "Are we?"

"To my knowledge the cargo we're carrying is fully compliant with local and interstellar law," said AG-37. The assassin droid's mechanical voice was cool and controlled, as always. His metal hands gripped the control yoke and nudged them further toward orbit.

Sauk, their Mon Calamari mechanic, was more concerned. "Maybe we'd better check," his voice trembled.

"Good idea," said the ship's fourth crew member, former Imperial Knight Jao Assam. "Let's break open those crates."

As Jao and Sauk unstrapped from their seats and started for the cockpit's exit, Ania turned back to AG-37. "We'll try to stall them. Right?"

"I am not comfortable with flouting law enforcement," the droid said. "We have a legal cargo-hauling operation. We are

not smugglers.” Nonetheless, he slowed *Free Agent* down and levelled its flight path without turning back to the surface.

“Well, let’s convince them,” muttered Ania. She tapped the comm console again, bent close to the speaker grille, and asked, “I’m sorry if there seems to be a problem, officer. Transfer your credentials and we’ll be happy to comply.”

Instead the other ship barked, “We won’t fall for stalling tactics! Set down *now* or we will open fire!”

Not what she was expecting. Ania had had to deal with less-than-friendly cops plenty of times. Most relished the chance to flash their badges and show off their authority. “Listen, we’ve got a lot of cargo aboard right now and if you can tell us what you’re looking for-”

AG-37’s droid-fast reflexes jerked the ship starboard just in time to avoid lancing laser-blasts. Ania thought she heard someone yelp back in the cargo section.

“What kind of weapons does that guy have?” she asked.

“Two standard laser canons,” AG-37 replied. “No warhead launchers visible.”

“Are you sure he’s a cop?”

“His ship type matches the model used by Christophsis law enforcement. Refusal to provide authentication is suspect.”

Ania bent over the speaker grille again. “Listen, we’ll be happy to set down, just give us your karking credentials so we know you’re who you *say* you are!”

The ship’s response was another hail of laserfire. Instead of slipped sideways, AG-37 pulled their nose skyward and punched them toward stars. There was a crashing sound in the rear compartment, and Jao shouted up, “Can we *please* get a warning next time?”

“Apologies,” AG-37 said. “We are currently engaged in evasive maneuvers. It would be best to restrain yourselves to avoid damage.”

Ania checked to make sure she was strapped into her seat as the droid threw his ship into more maneuvers. *Free Agent* was quick and nimble as far as cargo ships went but it was no starfighter, and no smuggler’s tramp freighter either. As AG-37 had said, they stuck to legal jobs wherever possible. They’d been contracted by a private citizen on Christophsis

to run some valuable art objects to a buyer on Mon Gazza. At least, he'd *said* they were art objects.

Twisting as much as her crash webbing would allow, Ania called back, "Hey! What have we got back there? Any surprises?"

"Just looks like lots of crystal sculptures to me," returned Jao.

Nobody had tried to stick them with contraband, then. "Looks like our cop-buddy's an art thief," Ania muttered.

"Likely he is not police it all," said AG-37 as their ship flared through the planet's upper atmosphere. "I detect two more law enforcement craft on patrols in orbit. Neither are moving to intercept us."

So he was a bully, pretending to be police as he tried to steal precious cargo. Ania was almost relieved; if this guy was after their crystal art sculptures he wouldn't try to blow them up.

Still, he was on their tail and catching up. As *Free Agent* pushed out of the atmosphere Ania turned her attention to the nav board and began plotting a hyperspace jump, but it would be a few minutes before they cleared the planet's gravity well. AG-37 threw his ship into the best twists and turns it could manage, but laserfire from that fake-cop's ship was still splattering over their shields, rocking Ania in her chair.

After all she'd been through the past few years- arrest and imprisonment, being wrongfully hunted by the Empire, her uneasy alliance with Empress Fel and the search for Darth Wredd- it would be really pathetic to get killed by a damned art thief.

When they were just a minute away from breaching the gravity well, Ania allowed herself a tiny breath of relief. Then- as if the universe was trying to prove she shouldn't get cocky- AG-37 announced, "All hands, brace for impact!"

Ania barely saw the warhead coming in from the starboard side. The explosion impacted on their shields and flashed so bright she had to squeeze her eyes shut. When they popped open a second later she saw an old Tri-wing starfighter slash across the viewport and wheel around for another pass.

"Looks like our guy has some friends after all," Ania gritted her teeth.

"Our guy' is closing fast from the rear. Our shields are nearly down," AG-37 reported. "That Tri-wing is blocking our exit vector."

He would be. Ania felt a tightening in her chest, an edging toward despair. "Maybe... maybe we should hail him again. Surrender."

"The cargo we carry is vital to our fiscal solvency," the droid said. "Furthermore, I doubt our pursuers will leave us undamaged."

"Two good arguments," she admitted. "But listen, maybe--"

The ship shook again, hard. Alarms in the cockpit wailed. AG-37 reported, "We have lost particle shields. They will likely target our engines next, then board us once we're disabled." The top half of his cylindrical head spun sideways to fix Ania with one red electric eye. "Rest assured, I will protect you with my life, Ania Solo."

It sent a shudder through her. The droid's loyalty to her ran deep, in ways she'd never understood, for reasons she'd never fully known. Sauk and Jao were like that too, each in their own way. Though *Free Agent* was AG-37's ship, Ania was aware that she'd fallen into the role of their misfit band's leader, not even willingly, but through the combination of unlikely circumstance.

Ania had never wanted power or responsibility. More often than not she'd run from it, but this ship and crew wouldn't be together now if it weren't for her. The lives of just three people- three friends- was a heavy thing to bear. If any of them ended up hurt or dead, she'd never forgive herself.

The thought filled her with dread; it also gave her an idea. Ania was at her best in moments of crisis.

"A-gee," she said, "We have to play dead."

For a second the droid's lower photoreceptor pulsed thoughtfully.

Then he said, "Understood."

When the next volley came he nimbly twisted the ship to avoid the blast, but cut power to engines at the same time. Momentum edged them away from the planet but the Tri-wing and fake-cop surged close from opposite sides.



The familiar, angry voice blared over the cockpit speakers: “Your ship is crippled. Try to run and we’ll blow you apart. Stand by for boarding and don’t try anything funny. We’re authorized to use lethal force in pursuit of criminals.”

“Sure you are, buddy,” Ania muttered.

AG-37’s upper photoreceptor swung back to Ania. “I suspect you’re planning to man the harpoon and tow cable.” He was always a fast learner.

As she unbuckled from her crash webbing she asked, “Can you give us a hard burn and lightspeed when I tell you?”

“It will not be good for the sublight engines, but yes.”

“All I want is to get the hell out of here.” Ania gave the droid a pat on his metal shoulder before slipping out of the cockpit, back to the cargo hold, where Sauk and Jao had strapped into jump seats extending from the port-side bulkhead.

“Ania, what’s going on?” Sauk asked, blinking huge eyes. “We’ve stopped, but we’re not damaged? Are we?” The Mon Cal mechanic had come to master every inch of this ship over the past two years. If the engines had really blown out, Sauk would have known from the vibration in the decks.

“We’re playing dead, trying to lure them in,” Ania said. “Jao, can I get a little help with the harpoon gun?”

Realization showed in his eyes quickly. The former Imperial Knight still didn’t totally mesh with the fringer crowd he’d fallen in with, but he’d gradually been adapting to their kind of thinking: resourceful, scrappy, often desperate. Jao unbuckled his crash webbing and hurried with Ania toward the access shaft leading to the gun turret on *Free Agent*’s ventral side.

Behind them, Sauk called, “What do I need to do?”

“Stay where you are for now,” Ania called back. “A-gee’s going to put us through hard sublight burn, then jump to lightspeed! Be ready!”

She heard the Mon Cal moan, mentally anticipating all the parts of *Free Agent* that could fail in that kind of maneuver, but she was already at the shaft and clambering down its ladder, Jao right behind her.

*Free Agent* usually used its harpoon and tow cable to move heavy cargo. The gun was aimed and fired from a bulbous

transparisteel turret that emerged from the ship's belly. Ania maneuvered herself into its control seat and Jao awkwardly squeezed into the compact space with her. She tried to ignore his literally breathing down her neck and gripped the controls firmly. Through the transparisteel bubble she could see the ostensible police cruiser pull alongside their drifting ship and noted its lack of government markings; probably bought second-hand by someone hoping to pass as official muscle. The Tri-wing that had ambushed them was nowhere to be seen.

Ania tapped the comm control and asked, "A-gee, do you see that snubfighter?"

"Currently holding at a dorsal position." the droid replied. "Directly above our laser turret."

That meant it was out of firing range too. "Think you can get past him when we burn?"

"Let me worry about that. Please concentrate on the other ship."

"Will do." Ania killed the comm and took a deep breath. At this range, with a little help from Jao, the harpoon should be able to punch through the hull casing around the police cruiser's thrust engines. Since those engines were cool now it would just cripple the ship instead of triggering a catastrophic explosion. Hopefully. Either way the harpoon itself would be forfeit; Ania would release the cable as soon as AG-37 accelerated.

Right now the harpoon gun was angled directly toward *Free Agent's* bow. That meant she'd have to pivot the barrel over one hundred degrees to punch through the engines of the police cruiser pulled alongside them. She didn't think anyone in the cruiser could see her from this angle, but she didn't want to risk it. She'd pivot, aim, and fire all in one second, before the cruiser's crew had a chance to react.

"You know what to do, right?" Ania asked Jao.

"You're aiming for the engines?" His breath tickled the back of her neck.

"Right. We just want to cripple 'em."

"I can do that."

Jao might no longer answer to the empress, but in his heart he still thought of himself as an Imperial Knight. Ania knew

that. She also knew that, as a Knight, he'd pledged to serve the light side of the Force and thus avoided unnecessary killing, even if it was *sleemo* pirates. Ania wasn't quite as moralistic, but she respected his resolve. It was a nice break from the kind of people she'd known most of her life.

"He's pretty close," Jao whispered. The police cruiser looked about ten meters away from coupling airlocks. Any closer and it would severely box *Free Agent* in and limit AG-37's ability to maneuver.

Ania opened her comm connection to the cockpit and announced, "Getting ready to fire... Five... four... three... two..." She grabbed the turret controls tight and wrenched them sideways. "One!"

She squeezed the trigger. The bubble shuddered as the harpoon fired. Behind her, Jao reached into the Force and guided the harpoon, veered it fast and hard directly into the drive casing the police cruiser's thrust engines. With Jao's additional Force-guided punch, the harpoon tore through the hull and lodged itself inside the engine tube. The police cruiser shuddered and jerked away from *Free Agent*.

As she slammed the release button, casting harpoon and tow cable free, Ania announced, "Go! Go! Go!"

AG-37 went. Acceleration slammed Jao and Ania hard, knocking them into each other and both into the turret's transparisteel bubble. Stars spun around them. Through from the turret bubble Ania couldn't see much else, only blue Christophsis falling away beneath them, and the sputtering police cruiser trying to lurch ahead on failing engines. A few laser blasts whipped toward them; AG-37 deftly evaded, once again knocking Ania and Jao about.

She heard the pop of some explosion and felt her heart freeze. Then the stars exploded into streams of light, and then the streams became the ghostly blue-white torrent of hyperspace.

Ania felt like cheering, but instead she said, "Can you move your arm?"

"Sorry," Jao winced, removing his elbow from beneath her left ribcage. As they disentangled from each other he asked, "Are you okay?"

"Maybe a bruise or two. I'm just glad to be alive." It was very true.

Jao climbed up the ladder first and Ania followed. Once they got to *Free Agent's* main corridor she called out, "Good flying, A-gee!"

"I performed competently as always," AG-37 declared from the cockpit. It had taken her a while to pick up when the droid sounded smug.

"Are we headed for Mon Gazza?"

"Correct. We should be there in approximately seven hours."

"Good to know," breathed Jao. "Hey, Sauk! How's the ship?"

The Mon Cal appeared from the door to the engineering section at the far end of the hallway. Even from a distance his expression looked wilted. "I think we may have engine trouble."

"May?" Ania stared toward him. "Can we get to Mon Gazza?"

"The hyperdrive is fine." Sauk held up a chunk of machinery so burnt-out it took Ania second to recognize it. "That hard burn blew out the stabilizing coil on our sublights."

Jao asked, "Will we still have power when we leave hyperspace?"

"We can get to Mon Gazza as long as we fly slow and careful," Ania said.

"So if anyone else comes after us we're in trouble." Jao scowled. Despite throwing in with *Free Agent*, he didn't take well to being sporadically chased and shot at by low-lives. "Who *were* those guys, anyway?"

"I don't know and don't want to find out." Ania planted hands on her hips. "You're sure those crates just have crystal sculptures in them? Right?"

"Just like our client said." Sauk paused. "Unless there's something *inside* the sculptures..."

Ania sighed. "There's easier ways to smuggle spice. I can't believe someone would go to that much trouble."

"I don't like the idea of running spice, especially if we've been conned into it." Jao crossed arms over his chest.

“Neither do I,” Ania admitted. “Sauk, think you can do a mid-level sonic scan, see if there’s any surprises hidden inside our sculptures?”

The Mon Cal blinked. “I have the equipment. But it’s only seven hours to Mon Gazza and I should really double-check the engines to make sure nothing else-”

Ania put a hand on his shoulder. “I know my way around an engine core. I’ll check it out. You give our cargo an extra-close look and make sure we’re *just* hauling art objects.”

Sauk nodded, a little reluctantly. He passed the broken stabilizing coil to Ania and went back to the cargo hold.

Once she was alone in the hallway with Jao, Ania released a sigh. “You should probably help him. I’ll be busy with the engines.”

“Right,” Jao said, but didn’t move. “Do you really think someone went to all that trouble just for art objects?”

“It’s possible.” Ania smiled wanly. “I knew a guy once who got hired to transport some Alderaanian moss-paintings. Ending up running from a half-dozen bounty hunters who wanted his cargo. Fine art is serious business.”

“Apparently.” His lips pressed tight.

“Hey, relax.” She jostled his shoulder. “If a bunch of power-mad murderous Sith Lords couldn’t stop us, you think these sleemos will?”

“Well, I sure hope not.” Jao tried a smile of his own. “It would be really embarrassing if they did.”

Embarrassment was not something Jao took lightly. He still had that Imperial dignity about him. “Wouldn’t it just? Go help Sauk. I don’t want any more surprises when we reach Mon Gazza.”

“Agreed.” Jao went back to the hold, leaving Ania alone in the hallway with a burnt-out chunk of ship in her hand.

She’d meant what she’d told Jao, but what he’d said was true too. It would be damned embarrassing to be beaten or killed on what was supposed to be a perfectly-legal, blue-milk-run errand. It was also still possible; the ruined stabilizing coil in her hand was like an icon of mortality. The four of them had cheated death, imprisonment, and other dire fates plenty of times and they’d almost gotten used to living on the edge, but never entirely. The escape from Christophsis

had rattled Jao and Sauk, and deep down it had rattled her too. She bet that even AG-37 was a little jarred beneath his cold metal exterior.

Still, they'd survived another close scrape. Once the fear was gone the adrenaline remained, pumping silently through her body. Alone in the hallway Ania smiled. For all the risks and close calls, she was glad to be on *Free Agent* now, doing what she did, with these people by her side. It was a life she'd never thought she'd had growing up, fending for herself from age twelve onward after losing both parents in the final days of the Sith-Imperial War.

Now she was free, but no longer lonely. In moments like this, when she stopped and thought about it, it almost seemed a miracle. Ania didn't know how long this set-up could last, but she'd ride with it as long as she could.

The planetary governor's mansion on Vorzyd V was a puzzle to be solved. It rested on the shore of Lake Joko, nestled by wooded space of the capital city's largest parkland. Layers of the best security available walled it off from the public parts of the forest: shigawire fences, tripwires, nearly a hundred heat- and motion-sensors hidden within the trunks of trees. Sneaking up through the forest was virtually impossible, even for a powerful Force-user.

Eli Horn was not that. He was eighteen years old, lean and nimble, alert and very driven, but he was still an apprentice. His master, perhaps, could have infiltrated the facility by coming through the forest but Eli elected to approach from the lake. After donning a thermo-layered diving suit that would mask his heat signature from underwater sensors, he dove into Lake Joko and swam half a kilometer, alternately submerged and surfacing to gain his bearings. The governor's mansion was lit up in the night, a beacon to guide him through black waters.

He swam the last two hundred meters totally underwater and emerged on the lakeshore's stony beach a hundred meters downshore from the mansion. That placed him well inside the perimeter that wrapped around the forest. He immediately crawled out of her thermo-suit, hid it in the nearby bushes, then crouched low and removed his macro-

binoculars from the same water-sealed pouch in which he kept his lightsaber. Using the binoculars' night-vision, Eli scanned the lake-facing side of the mansion. He spotted two security guards walking lazy loops around the exterior, plus two more standing by the wide glassy doors leading from the house to the beach. He also marked three holo-cams with bulbous lenses. They all seemed to be angled outward, looking on the beach and outside grounds rather than the doors.

Eli continued to crawl through the brush. His armored jumpsuit was black and he'd dabbed ebon makeup over his face, leaving naturally-pale rings around his eyes. He crawled slowly, carefully, always keeping his attention ahead. He timed the circuits of the marching guards and tentatively reached out with the Force to sense the torpid minds of hired guns, waiting for their shifts to end. Governor Saalo was a being who could buy loyalty but not inspire it.

By the time Eli reached the edge of the treeline he'd decided his method of attack. He waited for the patrolling guard to pass, then sprinted for the side of the mansion. As his master had taught him, he used the Force to momentarily blur the security camera. When he reached the wall he removed the fiberchord cable from his belt, tossed and it up to the rim of the second-storey window, where it snagged tight. He climbed quickly, hands on cable and boots against wall, body near-horizontal as he ascended. As he continued to blur the camera he used the Force to sense if the other guard was coming close. Eli had timed everything perfectly: he completed his ascent just as the oblivious guard rounded the corner. Using the Force he jarred the window open and rolled into the dark, empty room.

He was inside, but this was the hard part. Now he had to find Governor Saalo. He'd studied a map of the mansion's layout, but he knew little about the interior security systems and had no idea where Saalo was right now. Crouched in what appeared to be a staid spare bedroom, Eli reached out with the Force and tried to get a sense of the other beings in this building.

He sensed only a few; most of Saalo's guards seemed to be outside. Eli had been told that the governor's office and

sleeping quarters were on the uppermost storey. Carefully, he slipped out of the bedroom and into the hallway. It was well-lit and, worse, he spotted the bugeye of a holocam tucked against the ceiling. With a touch of the Force he blurred it. As he worked his way deeper inside the building Eli garbled two more. When he reached the broad marbled stairwell that ran from the first storey to the top, he sneaked up with careful, soundless steps. Footfalls echoed up from the bottom floor and his heart was throbbing in his chest by the time he reached the top level.

His distraction almost cost him. Eli stepped into the hallway and nearly colliding with a tall, green-skinned Vorzydiak in a black guard's uniform. The guard blinked in shock, then reached for his stun baton and opened his mouth to call for help. Eli was faster. He reached out with the Force and grabbed the guard's windpipe, squeezed it, stopping his shout and his breath. With his right hand, Eli jabbed the guard in his lower abdomen, right where Vorzydiaks kept their equivalent of the human heart. With his left, he wrestled the stun baton from the guard's hand. He jabbed the weapon's end into the guard's side and tapped the trigger once, sending enough electric energy to drop the alien to the plush carpet.

Heart still pounding, Eli looked around the hall. No bugeye spying on him; he'd gotten lucky. He felt a swell of power looking down on the Vorzydiak twitching at his feet. It would be so easy to kill, a heel on the neck. He'd killed before, first in self-defense, then deliberately, as his master goaded him on. It had been hardest the first time but even then Eli had known it would be a necessary act. Without it he could have never separated himself from the Jedi, nor could he have joined the path of the Sith.

He'd been born to be a Jedi. His father had been one, and when he'd been five years old Reikar Horn had died, sacrificing himself to angry hordes at Duro so a shipful of Jedi and Yuuzhan Vong could escape. At first young Eli had seen his father as a model for selfless nobility, and he'd clung to that ideal with increasing desperation as Jedi after Jedi was hunted and killed by Darth Krayt's minions. The Jedi's nobility and self-sacrifice had earned them infamy,



and the beings they purported to protect betrayed them to the Sith time and again.

The tattered remains of that ideal had died three years ago, when Darth Krayt's reign seemed supreme. Eli and his fellow padawans had been hiding with supposed allies on Corsin. Their protectors sold them out to Krayt's hunters; they'd been captured, brought to the Sith Temple on Coruscant, and given the simple choice: submit or die.

Betrayed by those he'd sworn to protect and burning with anger, Eli alone chose to live. Since that day he'd been trained not to surrender to the vicissitudes of a hostile galaxy but to fight and subdue. In the two years since Krayt's death the One Sith had suffered a dizzying reversal; now the Jedi and Imperial Knights ruled the galaxy and the Sith were hunted fugitives. Since the Battle of the Floating World a year ago, the Sith had been winnowed to a mere handful. In moments of honesty, Eli wondered whether he'd chosen the right side after all. Yet deep in his heart, he remembered how the Jedi were again and again betrayed by those they'd served, and he knew the true path to safety was through power. The only route to power was through violence.

But his master had told him not to kill tonight, not unless his survival was at stake. So Eli dragged the guard down the hall, found the doorway to a dark and quiet room, and left the guard inside.

Then he went back to hunting Governor Saalo. His heart still beat fast; with effort he calmed himself, summoning fragments of Jedi breathing techniques he still remembered. He reached out with the Force once more and searched this uppermost hall. He found one commanding presence and knew it must be the governor. Eli followed it down more ornate halls, Force-jamming two more cameras before he came before a set of old-style wooden doors, resting on hinges and sealed tight. Through the crack between them he listened to a deep voice speaking in the Vorzydiak tongue. He did not know what it said, but he stayed crouched at the door, listening for two full minutes, to make sure there was only one being in the room.

Eli waited. It seemed to take an eternity, but eventually Governor Salo ended the transmission. Eli stood up, drew his

lightsaber in one hand, and with a flick of the Force swung both doors open.

Saalo was exactly where Eli expected him to be: standing over his desk's communication console, back to the broad office window, staring at newcomer in frozen shock. That was all Eli needed; he used the Force to roughly grab Saalo by the neck and throw him to the carpet. Eli was on him in a second, straddling his torso, blazing red lightsaber-tip angled at the alien's green and wide-eyed face.

"What... what the devil is this?" Saalo wheezed in accented Basic. "Who are you?"

"You *know* who I am," Eli growled and inched his blade closer to the Vorzydiak's face. "Vigo Pleshchai paid you to do something and now you need to *do* it. Is that clear?"

"I... I've done everything Pleshchai asked!"

"If Pleshchai thought so I wouldn't be here," Eli snarled. He found he wanted to spear this blubbering idiot through the face. The galaxy was full of crooked politicians taking Black Sun bribes; only a true fool thought he could take his kickbacks without returning the favors. "His people are *still* being arrested. Lawyers and judges are *still* looking into his businesses. His goods are *still* being held at the port."

"I-I'm just the governor! I can't control *everyone*!"

"You can and you will! If any policeman, any judge or lawyer, any import official messes with Pleshchai's business again, you will *pay*. Do you understand me?"

To his surprise, Saalo mounted a brave, bitter grin. "Or *what*, boy? Even Black Sun wouldn't kill a planetary governor."

Vigo Pleshchai would barely flinch. Eli would consider it an honor to rid the galaxy of such filth. That was another reason he'd joined the Sith: the cull the corrupt and bring order. He drew his saber back a little and opened his mouth to tell Saalo just that when the doors burst open and three guards dashed in.

*Stupid*, Eli thought. Of course Saalo would have a silent alarm. He resisted the urge to cut through the governor's neck and jumped off him instead, lifting his saber to deflect a volley of laserblasts. The guards spread out to trap him between differing angles of fire, and Eli struggled to deflect

shots coming from three sides. He called on the Force to throw objects around the room: datapads, art pieces resting on tabletops, antique books on shelves. One sculpted glasswork took a guard between the shoulders; Eli sprung forward, cut his rifle in half, and kned the man hard in the face. He spun on his other foot, caught attacks from the other two guards, then charged the closest one.

That guard backed away, ran into the wall, and surprised Eli by throwing his rifle away and drawing out a long vibro-knife. He met Eli by ducking low and stabbing high. He slipped beneath Eli's broad horizontal swing and thrust his blade up; the young man had to twist to avoid a knife in the stomach and flipped his blade down to drive it through the guard's torso, a definite killing blow.

His master would forgive him for that one.

When Eli spun to face the third guard he found that three more had come into the room. They formed a barricade around Governor Saalo, who stood near the open doors with a white grin on his face. Rather than flee, he wanted to see Vigo Pleshchai's assassin go down, and Eli realized with a touch of terror he might well get his wish.

The four guards unleashed their next volley. Eli deflected all he could but lasers singed his arms and legs. One guard tried to attack him from the left flank. Eli lunged and slashed the guard deep across the chest, dropping him, but took a blast square in his right shoulder, one that filled his whole arm with pain and forced him to switch his saber to his weaker left hand.

Still the guards attacked. They didn't care about wrecking their employers' office; all that mattered was killing the intruder. Through his panic Eli felt a dawning despair; he'd never imagined that his end would be this brutal, this embarrassing, this *pointless*.

Then the window behind him shattered. Cold wind and broken glass rushed into the room, and with it the sensation of cold black determination in the Force. Eli knew his master was here.

She descended into the middle of the room in a tumble of scarlet and black, hitting the carpet in the middle of the shoulder-roll that brought her to her feet in between two

guards. A red lightsaber bisected one at the hip; the other dashed away in time but she lunged after him, cleaved the barrel from his blaster, then his head from his shoulders.

The last guard hefted his rifle to fire at her. Eli got to him first, thrusting saber through ribcage, shifting downward to sever the Vorzydiak's heart in two. As the body crumpled at his feet, Governor Saalo finally conquered his shock and tried to escape. He never even got through the door; with a lifted hand, Eli's master raised his body into the air, threw it across the room, and slammed it hard onto the desktop.

Without shutting off her lightsaber, Darth Talon stalked over to Saalo. The Twi'lek woman moved with a feral grace, and the governor's eyes went wide as he took in the primal black tattoos lacing her scarlet body from lekku-tip to toe. Unlike Eli, Darth Talon had been born Sith, raised Sith, and had been the most trusted Hand of the late Dark Lord Krayt.

Now she held her saber against Saalo's neck, looked down at him with pitiless eyes, and said, "You will do exactly as Vigo Pleshchai requested. Is that understood?"

Saalo found it in himself to nod.

Talon continued, "We can kill you. Any time. Any place. You're not safe unless Pleshchai *wants* you safe. Is that clear?"

"Very," rasped Saalo.

"Good." Talon shut off her lightsaber and looked to the young human. "Come with me, apprentice."

Humbly, Eli nodded. When she moved for the window he followed, and together they leaped out into the night.

The High Numbers was one of a dozen gambling houses along what was known as the Casino Line, the busiest nightlife district in Vorzyd V's capital city of Efavan and certainly the most gaudy. Holographic advertisements twenty-meters high projected from building-sides to fill the night air and speeder-buses full of partying sentients from half the Outer Rim drifted down the Line's luminous steel canyon.

Seen from the window of the High Numbers' most private office, the sight seemed especially garish: artificial light and artificial joy, desperate beings groping for fleeting

satisfaction through drink and high-risk games of chance. Compared to the power and satisfaction derived from the Force, all other pleasures were vulgar. Darth Krayt had called those unable to touch the Force ‘vermin,’ and right now it seemed to Darth Talon that she was looking down on a hive of mindless insects, impelled by genetic design to scurry about on pointless activities as they tried to fill brief pointless lives. Her master had warned Talon against pitying the vermin; the best that could be done for them was to use them, mercilessly if need to be, to advance the grand design of the Sith.

She heard her name called, turned from the window, and saw a reminder that vermin came in many forms. Pleshchai, a large-bodied, yellow-skinned Squalris, was officially the chief financial executive for the High Numbers. He was also a Black Sun captain for a quarter of the Outer Rim, and he right now he looked disgustingly pleased that a disobedient local governor had gotten fear of the Sith put into him.

Sitting back in his chair, puffing his cigarra, Pleshchai said, “I have a feeling I won’t be getting any more trouble from Saalo. I always knew you people were miracle-workers.”

“What about the guards we killed?” asked Eli, as much to his master as Pleshchai.

The vigo shrugged. “He’ll cover it up somehow. Call it an accident. He’d never *admit* that intruders attacked him in his own home and killed most of his security team. You can be sure he won’t go to Coruscant either.”

“Empress Fel has placed a high bounty on the heads of any Sith,” Darth Talon reminded him. “You should monitor his communications.”

“I do that already.” Pleshchai waved his cigarra. “But he won’t run to the Empress. Even if he rids himself of you two, he’ll never rid himself of Black Sun. Saalo is stubborn, but he’s no fool.”

The vigo savored another puff. Talon fought to keep the scowl from her face. Just two years ago, the Sith had ruled supreme. The entire galaxy had laid in her master’s hand and she had been his most trusted servant. From as early as she could remember, her life had been defined by service to Darth Krayt and his design. Krayt’s power had been on an

upward ascent that entire time, and she'd never had any reason to doubt her master. In service she gave her life meaning; it had all been so simple.

But for two years, disaster had followed disaster. Krayt was dead, Lady Maladi missing, Coruscant in the hands of Marasiah Fel and her pet Imperial Knights. Most of the One Sith had been trapped and slaughtered on the Floating World. Now they scraped to survive in the shadows, making deals with vermin criminals. Lord Nihl remained as Dark Lord, and Talon still served him, but for all his dark power Nihl was no Krayt. He was not ancient and wise and fierce like Krayt; he did not have the vision.

Still, Talon served him. Service had always been the whole of her life; she had no idea what might replace it.

"We've done what you asked," Talon told Pleshchai. "You will keep your end of the bargain."

"I *will*? That sounds like a demand," the fat Squalris smirked. "Ah, Lady Talon... Women of your kind are usually so *charming*. So sensuous, so eager to please. So I have to wonder... what went wrong with *you*?"

"Nothing," she said, stone-faced, and fought the desire to strangle the fool where he sat.

"I thought you'd say that." Pleshchai drew a datacard from the folds of his robe. "This is access information to a credit account. It will have the amount we agreed on, plus a ten-percent bonus."

Talon gave Eli a nod. The young human took the datacard and pocketed it.

"If there's nothing else, my security staff will see you out," Pleshchai said, and when no one objected he tapped a button on his armchair and summoned a pair of silver-plated security droids. Talon and Eli slipped out of the room without another word.

Talon moved swiftly down the casino's gilded hall, taking long strides. Eli hurried to keep up and the droids started to lag behind.

"I could feel your anger," Eli said softly, then added, "I'm sorry for my performance tonight. I should have been able to take them all."

"My anger is not directed at you, apprentice."

In truth, the young man had performed admirably, getting to Saalo's lair and taking out four security guards on his own. Talon had been skeptical when Darth Nihl insisted she take an apprentice, even more when she learned it was a teenager who'd only defected from the Jedi when he had a red saber to his throat. To her surprise, Eli was a quick learner. He came from the Horn family, a fairly illustrious Jedi line, and he had great natural aptitude with the Force. More importantly, the murder of his father at the hands of an anti-Jedi mob had instilled him with a store of repressed anger that was very useful. He might be a great Sith in the future... if there *were* any Sith in the future.

Eli thought on her words and intuited her meaning. "We do what we must to survive, Master. We deal with who we must."

Talon nodded curtly. "We will make sure the credits in Pleshchai's account transfer successfully. Then we'll be gone from here."

Eli nodded and looked slightly relieved. Vorzyd V was a garish, venal place and neither of them would miss it. Still, Talon knew that when this left this world they'd be fleeing from it, not fleeing toward somewhere greater. The power and purpose the Sith had known under Darth Krayt was gone. Though she'd denied it to Eli, Darth Talon doubted they would come again.

## Chapter Two

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That she'd been born to rule had been drilled into Marasiah Fel from a young age. Even when her father had lost his throne and spent seven years in exile, he'd spoken of a return to power, and his daughter's eventual succession, as inevitable. Nonetheless, it was no easy thing to suddenly find herself empress of the known galaxy.

The beings with whom she shared the table now, deep inside the new palace's most secure conference room on Coruscant, were her counterweights, the checks on her power, and as aggravating as Grand Master K'Kruhk and Admiral Gar Stazi could sometimes be, Marasiah was often glad for them, if only because they helped spread the burden and the blame that went with governing.

The Treaty of Federation signed after Darth Krayt's defeat nominally spread power across the three of them as a triumvirate. In practice, Marasiah was supreme. As the Empress Fel she inherited the military and power structure built up by her father and grandfather before Krayt had usurped it. The military and bureaucracy continued to be managed by her hand-picked admirals and ministers. Yet per the treaty she'd made significant concessions, including the incorporation of Gar Stazi's core fleet as a special autonomous division of the Federation navy. Stazi and K'Kruhk could veto many of her decisions. Most importantly, Marasiah had agreed to re-establish an elected senate within three years of the treaty, and that was what they'd come here to discuss today.



As usual, it was Stazi who pressed hardest. “Thousands of Alliance senators were arrested by Darth Krayt. Some were even executed. They deserve proper recompense.”

“I’m aware of that, Admiral. The vast majority of them have been released, with amnesty, and are free to run for their positions again if they wish.”

“*All* of them deserve to be freed.”

“The ones left in prison- comfortable, low-security prison- are the ones advocating re-establishment of the old Alliance in every way. That includes breaking up this triumvirate. That’s treason.”

“In the Empire, maybe. In the Alliance beings were allowed to air their opinions.”

“The Alliance,” she said pointedly, “Lost the war.”

“That was the last war, and your father lost it too. We won this latest war *together*.”

The Duros stared at her hard, unflinching. Marasiah fought a scowl. As usual, it was K’Kruhk who played peacekeeper. “What we have now is neither the Empire nor the Alliance. This Federation is something new, and that requires new ways of thinking. Empress Fel, once the senate is established it’s your intention to dissolve the old Moff Council, correct?”

She nodded; she’d been stripping it of its power for the past two years and looked forward to doing away with it entirely. “There will be no need of it. Once the Federation has a proper legislature, the Council’s role can be consigned to an elected cabinet.” Marasiah planned to give the legislature broad control over local affairs, but had no intention of ceding executive power when it came to military, intelligence, and diplomacy. To keep a galaxy-spanning government together a strong central hand was needed, one not prey to the vagaries of a fickle electorate. She believed that absolutely and thought, deep down, Stazi and K’Kruhk accepted it too. One was military, the other a Jedi; neither were democratic organizations.

Yet the Duro pressed, “Many beings will not see these elections we’re holding as legitimate, not unless they can vote for whomever they chose. An election where candidates are vetted in advance by Imperial overseers is not free or fair.”

“And a senate where half the members want to secede it is invitation to anarchy. The galaxy has been through enough war, Admiral. I won’t let another start on my watch.”

Stazi took a breath before launching another attack. K’Kruhk interjected, “There is no certainty that, once released, those senators will be elected. Even if they were, there’s not enough of them to form a secessionist block in the senate.”

“There’s no guarantee either way,” said Marasiah. “Until elections are held, any guesses on the senate’s composition is a leap in the dark.”

“Unless elections are truly free,” said Stazi, “The senate won’t have credibility with the people.”

“Power justified itself. Once the senate starts exerted the authority we allow, it will have all the credibility it needs.”

“No it won’t, not if it looks like a glorified approval stamp for this triumvirate.” Stazi stabbed a green finger into the tabletop. “A functioning senate will allow all of the galaxy to feel like it has a part in this federation. Right now it doesn’t. Right now this government looks like a sectarian dictatorship controlled by yet another Force-using cult.”

“That,” K’Kruhk said, “is a gross exaggeration.”

“Is it? With all due respect, Master Jedi, Force-users make up less than one percent of this galaxy’s population but two-thirds of its government. I’m not the only one who sees it as outsized influence.”

“The Jedi and Imperial Knights are hardly in agreement on everything. You know that.”

“I do, but to the rest of the galaxy? They don’t understand your kind. They only know you control them, and have- in some shape of form- for the past decade. When beings are controlled by something they don’t understand, they can easily start to hate and fear it. If this government is meant to be for the whole galaxy, it must be *by* the whole galaxy. That means the influence of Force-users must be proportionally diminished.” He looked back to Marasiah. “This triumvirate is a suitable caretaker, but for the galaxy to stay stable long-term we must have a senate that *means* something. Otherwise this government will last no longer than the one we overthrew.”

Stazi stared hard; Marasiah didn't flinch. Giving in here would open the door to more concessions and she wasn't prepared to do that.

K'Kruhk must have sensed that. The old Whiphid put his claws on the table and said, "Perhaps we should all consider our positions, and reconvene tomorrow."

Stazi relented. "I suppose we can. I have a meeting with Admiral Bey this afternoon that promises to be productive. I'd hate to miss it for something that's not."

Stazi pushed up from the table. He gave K'Kruhk and Marasiah curt nods and left the chamber. Marasiah allowed a sigh of released frustration. Through the Force she caught faint amusement from K'Kruhk.

"Is something funny, Master Jedi?"

"A long time ago, the Jedi Order became entangled in the politics of the Old Republic. It is not a time I remember fondly, which is why I was reluctant to take part in this triumvirate of yours."

It was something K'Kruhk knew personally. He was nearing his third century of life and had experienced things Marasiah could only perceive as history. He was one of the few beings who could easily humble her.

"Your point, Master Jedi?"

"They say Jedi are peacekeepers. I think peacekeepers are most valuable *outside* wartime."

"I do appreciate your attempts at arbitration."

"And I am pleased to say you remind me little of Chancellor Palpatine." K'Kruhk nodded his long head. "Good day, Empress."

The old Whiphid shuffled for the door. Marasiah decided to be content with compliments when they came and followed him into the foyer. K'Kruhk had joined in conversation with his aide and confidant, Soht Lenar. The Zabrak woman was young but had earned the title Master during the fight against Krayt. Apparently Jedi ranked up in wartime as fast as anyone.

For her part, Marasiah's uncle was waiting for her. Though trained and accomplished as an Imperial Knight, Hogram Chalk had been badly damaged in an accident, and as long as Marasiah could remember he'd been a stern figure, draped in

black armor with his face marked by scars and a mechanical eyepiece.

His stern countenance relaxed when he set eyes on his niece. He offered Marasiah his arm, which she took as both worked their way through the palace's halls, back to her office.

"I take it the meeting did not lead to much progress," Hogrum observed.

"Stazi is a stubborn being. As stubborn as my father." It was hard to talk about him, still. She took a deep breath and went on, "Stazi insists we allow all former Alliance senators to run for office, even those who view our triumvirate as illegal and me as a usurper tyrant."

"The more Alliance figures in the new government, the greater clout Stazi has," her uncle said. "A transparent ploy."

"He believes the election will not be legitimate unless *all* are allowed to run."

"We've also arrested many Imperials for their unapologetic service to the Sith. Is Stazi crying for their release? No. Of course not. That's in neither of your interests. When someone starts invoking lofty principles, look behind them for what he *really* wants. It's always something specific that will benefit him in some way. Always."

Her uncle's words, cynical as they were, brought a faint smile to her face. "You lecture your empress on politics?"

"I'm your intelligence director, and your mother's brother. I care for you, Siah, and I'll do everything I can to support your reign." Looking dead ahead, voice cold, he added, "I do not want you to repeat any of your father's mistakes. And they were many."

To the rest of the galaxy, including nearly all the Imperial Knights, her father had been slain by a Sith assassin aboard the *Jagged Fel* during the final battle at Coruscant, much like his father Davek forty years ago. Only a tiny handful- Marasiah herself, her uncle, Antares Draco and Treis Sinder- knew the truth. In his lust to defeat Darth Krayt and avenge all the damage the Sith had dealt him- their taking of his throne, his wife, his father and older brother- Roan Fel had succumbed to the darkness inside and attempted to use a Sith-made bioweapon to wipe out a trillion lives on

Coruscant, all to secure the ruin of the Sith. Suddenly the man who'd been Marasiah's paragon all her life had become the embodiment of what she must avoid. After two years she still hadn't come to terms with that. She doubted she ever would.

Her uncle seemed as eager to change the subject as her. "I received word from Master Draco. He'll be waiting for you in your office."

"Did he say why?"

"No, only that it was urgent."

She fought a frown and tried to guess what had gone wrong. A dozen possibilities came to mind and she quickened pace toward her office.

On becoming empress she'd appointed Antares Draco as First Knight. They'd married four months later. Her father had objected strongly to their relationship while alive, but that was just one of the things he'd been wrong about. Her mother Elliah had been First Knight to her father, official leader of the Imperial Knights. Before that, her grandmother and namesake had been First Knight to Davek Fel. As her husband and First Knight both, Antares was more forthright with her than anyone, including her uncle. She admired that about him, along with his idealism and disregard for politics. She didn't always take his advice, but she always considered it, and when she reached her decision Antares always obeyed.

When she and Hogrum reached her office she found Antares in the process of anxiously pacing behind her desk. The midday Coruscant skyline glowed behind him, and reflected sunlight glared on his scarlet armor.

"Thank you for waiting for me, Master Draco." This was clearly official business, and she'd treat it as such. "What do you have to tell me?"

Her uncle made no show of excusing himself, and Antares didn't ask him to. The younger man planted balled fists on Marasiah's desk and said, "I believe Master Krieg has gone missing."

Antares didn't bother to hide the ache in his voice. In addition to being one of his most trusted and capable Imperial Knights, Ganner Krieg was also his friend. Calm and thoughtful, Ganner was a counterweight to Antares'

ardor, and in some ways Marasiah trusted his advice more than her husband's.

"Master Krieg is on a mission to Belgaroth, correct?" Hogrum asked.

Antares nodded. "He was following reports of Sith activity in the area. He's not checked in for two standard days. I'm afraid something might be wrong."

Since the Battle of the Floating World, Marasiah had tasked Antares and Hogrum both with finding the last remnants of the One Sith. When Imperial Knights were sent to investigate suspected activity they usually went in pairs, but because of his seniority and the relative weakness of the Belgaroth claim, Ganner had gone alone.

"Usually," Hogrum said, "We consider agents missing after three days of silence. But in this situation... I agree. We should take action."

Antares looked to Marasiah. "Empress, I can be on Belgaroth in less than a standard day. I'm ready to leave now."

She could tell how badly he wanted to go find his friend. He'd never forgive himself if Ganner was captured or killed, just like he'd never forgiven himself for killing his own emperor, no matter how much Marasiah tried to absolve him of guilt.

Once, Antares and Ganner had defied Roan Fel and risked everything to rescue Marasiah. This time he couldn't afford to run off in desperate heroism. She touched his shoulder and sent him warm sympathy through the Force. "You're my First Knight. You have many duties here- including safeguarding all the other Knights who are out searching for Sith."

"Master Krieg is almost certainly in danger. If I don't-"

She moved her hand to cup his face, stroking rough stubble on his chin. Antares was a man who always wanted to do everything by himself. She loved that about him, but it was a desire incompatible with authority. "No. You have too much to do here. But we *will* send our best Knights after Ganner immediately."

His lower lip twitched. "Who will you send?" he asked.

Marasiah withdrew her hand, considered, and found the choice was easy.

When Azlyn Rae arrived at the doors to the empress' office she found Master Treis Sinde was already there. The gray-bearded Knight, fit and capable despite being one of the oldest in their order, greeted her with a tiny nod. Azlyn returned it in silence. She'd been summoned suddenly; if Sinde had a better idea of what this was about, he wasn't saying.

Azlyn stood beside him and resigned herself to a wait. Like Sinde she was dressed in the scarlet armor of all Imperial Knights; unlike the rest, hers had literally become a piece of her. A device of Hogrum Chalk's design breathed for her, replacing lungs that had been irreparably damaged during the battle with Darth Krayt on Had Abbadon. Likewise metal plating replaced broken ribcage and synthetic implants replaced organs burned to nothing by Krayt's savage Force lighting. Despite repeated bacta treatments, her skin was still laced with scars. She confronted them every time she looked in a mirror.

Azlyn Rae was still more woman than machine, but often she felt otherwise. By all right she should have died on Had Abbadon. She'd been ready to, satisfied she'd done her part for the will of the Force, but Cade Skywalker had desperately kept her alive until bacta and prosthetics could be forced on her. Sometimes she hated him for it, and it was a struggle to keep away from those dark thoughts. Giving in to self-pity was all too easy.

She'd been given much guidance by her original teacher in the ways of the Force, Jedi Master Rasi Tuum. One good thing to come out of the war was the détente between the Imperial and Jedi knights. Though Master Tuum had never asked her aloud, she knew he wondered whether she would rejoin the Jedi now that Marasiah Fel had signaled openness to the idea. Her first thought on getting today's summons was that the empress might have called her to discuss that. Now she realized that was a selfish thought; whatever was happening was much bigger than her.

After five long minutes, the doors to the empress' office opened. Azlyn was unsurprised when Antares Draco waved them inside. The empress herself was on her feet behind her desk, wearing a white dress and gold crown. Azlyn and Sinde both gave short, formal bows.

"Thank you both for coming. I have a mission for you to undertake together. I expect you to leave Coruscant within an hour."

Azlyn had a bad feeling about this. Sinde asked, "Is there a problem, Majesty?"

"Master Krieg has gone missing on Belgaroth."

The simple sentence gathered cold in Azlyn's gut. She'd begun her Force training on Ossus, only to end up with the Imperial Knights during Krayt's purge. Many of the other apprentices had been skeptical about taking a Jedi into their ranks, but not Ganner. At the time Azlyn had been beset by grief for all the friends and mentors she'd thought dead, most of all for Cade Skywalker. What they'd had together on Ossus had lingered in her mind for a long time, distracting her from the obvious fact that Ganner Krieg hoped to be more than just her friend.

Cade was gone for good now. They said he'd died in the final battle against Darth Krayt. Two years on and she still couldn't say how she felt about him; her life was tied too closely to his. Good memories and bad wound together into a strangling knot. Since his death she'd allowed herself to become closer to Ganner; after all she'd been through she needed a friend, and he was certainly willing to be that. On considering whether to leave the Imperial Knights she'd found herself hesitant to leave Ganner behind, and that in turn was forcing her to reevaluate just what he meant to her.

And now all that confusion could amount to nothing too. With a dry mouth Azlyn asked, "Why was he on Belgaroth?"

"We received warning of Sith activity on the planet," Draco supplied. "The veracity seemed questionable, so we dispatched Master Krieg alone. He's been totally silent for two days and missed his scheduled check-ins. We should assume the worst."

"We've leave for Belgaroth right away," Sinde said. "Can we get a summary of what exactly Krieg was investigating?"



Draco held out a datacard. "This contains all you need. You can review it on the way to Belgaroth."

Sinde took it. "We'll comm you if we have any questions."

"If you find any hint of Sith activity at all, comm us immediately," Marasiah said. "I'm ready to drop a star destroyer over Belgaroth if that's what's necessary."

"I hope it won't come to that." Sinde made a fist around the datacard.

Marasiah passed her gaze to Azlyn. "Any questions?"

*Why me?* she wanted to ask. Draco was Ganner's best friend, mis-matched as they were. He surely knew about Azlyn's relationship with the missing party. Maybe that was why they had chosen her; because this was one Imperial mission she'd do anything to help with.

Instead she asked, "What ship did he take?"

"A GPE-7300, civilian-model. We fixed it with a tracking device, and that, at least, is still transmitting from Belgaroth. Investigating that is your first priority. Is there anything else?"

That was enough. Azlyn said, "Nothing more, Majesty."

"Then please get going. We don't have time to waste."

## Chapter Three

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The Killee Wasteland on Socorro was a spread of black-sand desert a thousand square kilometers wide, interrupted only occasionally by vertical-walled buttes and mesas rising hundreds of meters above the flat lifeless expanse. Most of the rocky platforms were just as barren, and the closest thing to a city in the entire Killee was the cluster of dilapidated metal buildings- tenements, workshops, cantinas- all grown up like lichen around the rim of what had once been a sarlacc's pit burrowed into one butte.

The sarlacc was long gone, but the pit was filled with another monster nowadays. The *Crimson Axe* was technically a starship, but it looked like a dagger-blade driven point-first into the mouth of the pit. It towered above the decrepit buildings of the surrounding town, a constant reminder that everything and everyone on this butte owed existence to *Crimson Axe*'s owner, the retired Feeorin space pirate Rav.

When she woke up every morning Kyra tried very hard not to look at *Crimson Axe*'s looming bulk. When she didn't have to get to work immediately, she'd strap on her boots, throw on the only cloak she owned, and trek through the town's streets to the nearest high outcropping. *Crimson Axe* and its so-called Axetown was a stopping-point for bounty hunters, fringers, and only rarely legitimate merchants. These were the kind of beings who spent all night partying hard and fighting hard, and the hours before dawn were the only ones in which these streets were quiet and safe.

When she clambered upon the outcropping Kyra could perch there, look to the southeast, and watch the sun crest over the Wasteland's flat surface. One moment it was just a red corona on the horizon; the next it was an explosion of light gleaming on the endless black sand expanse. The sudden illumination or yawning space was often the best part of her day.

But in the end the light was not for Kyra, nor the space, so once the sun was up she'd trudge back down the slope and get to work.

She knew a lot of the beings in Axetown called her place the Chopyard, which was as good a name as any. When she'd started working here three years ago the sign over the entrance had read: RUGO'S STARSHIP & SPEEDER REPAIR – WE FIX 4 CHEEP. She'd been just fourteen at the time, a stowaway on a smuggling ship that had made layover at Axetown. In retrospect its crew could have done much worse than boot her off once they'd found her, but at the time she'd had no credits and no food, just worn-down boots, old clothes, and bad memories from the last half-dozen planets she'd drifted through.

Rugo had been a Herglic five times her size, but despite his intimidating bulk he'd been the first person in Axetown not to greet her with a snarl or a leer. She'd offered a helping hand at his shop in exchange for food and a little money; to her surprise he'd taken her on. Rugo hadn't regretted it. Even at fourteen she'd been good with machines. She had an instinctive knack for it, an ability to discern and work with mechanical systems she hadn't even seen before. Rugo had recognized her worth early and treated her well. She'd more or less felt satisfied with her life here on Socorro, even if she never got paid much. Rugo was working through a pile of debt to *Crimson Axe's* master and most of the Chopyard's profits went to him.

Rugo had been killed five months back. Kyra had been watching the yard and the Herglic had gone off to buy supplies from the tool shop on the other side of Axetown. A bounty hunter had gunned him down in the middle of the street and claimed a price on Rugo's head for a robbery done twelve years earlier. Apparently Rugo had thought keeping

in good graces with *Crimson Axe*'s master would protect him. He'd been dead wrong.

The Chopyard had passed to Kyra, and so had Rugo's debt. The death of its owner did nothing to slow down business. Smugglers, bounty hunters, criminal and thieves all came to *Crimson Axe* and a lot of them came with ships that were worn down or shot up. Some let her buy spare parts for cheap, which were often quickly turned around and used for repair jobs.

In a sad way, Rugo's death made paying off the debt easier; a Herglic had a big, expensive mouth to feed. After every job Kyra had watched with mounting eagerness as her credits increased; after five months she was on the verge of having enough money to pay off everything Rugo had owed. Once that was done, she'd be able to store up money herself. She had no intention of staying on Socorro forever; her dreams got more vivid as she imaged buying her own ship, a cheap junker to start, and moving free around the galaxy. Maybe she'd haul cargo, legal or not. Maybe she'd even try bounty hunting. Maybe she'd find partners somewhere, beings like Rugo who didn't looked at her with snarls or leers. Beings she could work with, beings she could trust. That seemed the most fantastic future of all.

The day was almost here, and she could hardly contain her excitement. After getting up early to watch sunrise over the Wastes, Kyra went back to the Chopyard and began a last look-over of her latest job. It was a SoroSuub space yacht, decades old and heavily remodeled. The owner had dropped it into her fenced-off landing zone with sputtering repulsors and a black laser-torn gouge in its port engine. Once she got to work on it, Kyra was amazed the whole ship hadn't exploded yet. Its crew had spent the past five days in Axetown, presumably drinking and wenching and gambling in the settlement's dives and in the *Axe* itself. All the while Kyra had worked, sidelining smaller and less lucrative jobs and focusing on the SoroSuub yacht. Rugo had accumulated an impressive junkyard that Kyra had, by now, memorized to a piece, and she'd been able to scrounge up parts to rebuild the blown-apart engine, refit the repulsors, and install new stabilizing coils all through the power system. It was, she

thought with pride, one of the biggest and hardest repair jobs she'd done. Fitting it would be her last one as an indebted laborer.

The ship looked good in the new dawn light, and Kyra moved around the exterior hull, admiring the gleam on the new engine casing, before going inside to re-check the power core. As he examined the new wiring she'd installed she asked, "Everything look good, Sleepie?"

"Appears... ficcient... Miss... Kyra..." crackled the droid strapped to her back.

"What about the engines? Spot any micro-fractures?"

"Case... awless.... tress Kyra..."

She had a half-dozen droids who helped her with the work, but they were mostly labor models who took orders and couldn't more than chirp back in reply. Sleepie was the sole exception, and he wasn't much of a droid nowadays. He'd been a protocol droid once but somewhere along the line he'd lost his legs, half his chest-plate, his left arm and one of the photoreceptors in a face that was probably once a nice gold color.

She didn't know where Rugo had found him. The Herglic hadn't remembered either. Kyra had attempted some repairs. She'd replaced his missing photoreceptor with a micro-scanner that could examine surfaces up to one hundred times better than a human eye and also scan thermal signatures. She'd also replaced his vocoder, but that hadn't improved his annunciation. The droid's sluggish speech and faulty memory was apparently due to faults in his cortical matrix, and that was beyond her ability to repair.

Still, Sleepie had a perfect eye and helpful personality. He was a valuable friend to have, even if the one way he got around was strapped to her back. At least he wasn't too heavy with most of his metal body missing.

After she was done checking the ship, Kyra carried herself and Sleepie over to the main shop. She slung the droid's half-body off her back and onto the counter above the safe. Rugo had been wary of anything but hard physical money, and so were most of the people who stopped by *Crimson Axe*. Payments usually came in aurodium ingots, as universal a currency as you could find, and like most stores in Axetown,

the Chopyard kept only a small amount in the safe at any time. This was because nearly all their payment went straight to Axetown's master, but at least it discouraged robbers.

Kyra sighed, planted hands on her hips, and looked around the shop. Tubes of fresh-cut pipe were lined up across the countertop. Every section of wall space was covered in layers of used parts, the place constantly smelled like rust and service oil, and every day brought bittersweet memories of Rugo. Still, she'd been here three years, which was as long as she'd lived any place she could remember. She wanted to get away from here, but a part of her might miss it, at least until she got something better.

"Today's the day, Sleepie." She fondly stroked the droid's once-smooth head. "We're going to be free after this. I promise."

"Will... leave us... tress?"

"I'll take you with me. I'd like to get your repaired one day and hear everything you're trying to say."

"I... ike that... tress."

"I thought you would." She checked the wall-mounted chronometer. "Should be coming in soon."

Her clients kept her waiting almost an hour past their scheduled appointment time. She'd taken to pacing anxiously inside the shop, periodically glancing out the window at the landing field and the ship, just to make sure some quiet disaster hadn't happened when she'd been inside. Finally they came strolling through the door: a trio of Klatooinans with blasters on their hips and light armor strapped on their chests, as rough-looking as most her clients.

Half-slumped against the wall, Sleepie gave his usual rote salutation. "Greet.... am See... Pee... ations... How... assist you?"

The lead one, who'd given his name as Zokus, ignored the droid. "You got our ship fixed, human girl?"

"She'll be great to fly." Kyra gave a professional smile and gestured for them to follow her outside.

She left Sleepie in the shop and gave them a walk-around tour of their ship, noting all the modifications she'd made. The Klatooinians nodded acceptance throughout, and sometimes Zokus asked technical questions about the parts

she'd used. Her answers were always precise, and she could tell she'd impressed him.

When the tour was done Zokus left one of his men with the ship and took the other back to the shop. Once inside, Kyra picked her datapad off the counter next to the pipes and presented her client with the bill. Zokus' dewflaps peeled off his sharp teeth and his small eyes locked on hers.

"This is expensive."

She was used to customers putting up a fuss; Rugo had taught her how to deal with them. First came professional assurance. "There's a list of all the parts that were installed and the cost of each. I also tabulated hours worked. Everything here's cheaper than what you'd find anywhere else on Socorro."

"All you needed to do is fix the engines and tweak the repulsors. I didn't ask for all this work on my power relays."

"The ones you had were decades old and ready to break. Some of them already *had*. It's why your repulsors were out of whack in the first place. I didn't replace anything that didn't need replacing."

"You're still charging me for work I didn't ask for."

"You asked me to fix your ship. I did that and I'm going to get paid for it." She crossed her arms over her chest and tried to sound dominating. Rugo had always been much better at this part. He'd also been five times her size.

Zokus seemed to wilt and for just a second she thought he'd relent, she'd get her money, and she'd get out from under debt slavery and off this rock. Instead the Klatooinan snarled and drew the blaster from his hip.

"I don't like being scammed," he growled. "We'll take our ship. You keep the bill."

She'd looked down the business-end of a blaster before; she didn't like it any better this time. Heart pounding, Kyra tried to sound calm. "You really shouldn't do this."

"Why the kark not? I'll pay a fair price, not this."

"I'm not letting you leave here until you pay."

Zokus barked laughter at that; so did his partner. "How old are you, human girl?"

She scowled. "That doesn't matter."

Zokus' partner said, "Just shoot her boss, and let's go."

"You don't want to do that!" Kyra bleated. She was scared now and couldn't hide it.

"Why not? I remember Rugo, human girl. Nobody missed him. Why would they miss you?"

"You're not stealing from me. You know who owns this place, don't you? Same guy who owns everything *else* in Axetown. Listen you *stoopa*, it doesn't matter if you kill me or not. If you steal from here you steal from *Rav*. You know, fearsome Feeorin space pirate? Your name'll be on the *poodoo*-list for half the Outer Rim."

That seeped through their thick skulls; she saw the doubt, the hesitation. The distraction. She backed into the counter behind her, knocking a few of the pipes rested atop it. She lowered one hand and felt hard curved metal slap into her palm. Zokus fired but she knew it was coming and ducked low, then struck out with one leg and knocked the Klatooinan off-balance. She lurched onto Zokus' back, windmilled the pipe upward, and brought it horizontally beneath his chin. Creeping arms up from under his shoulders she pressed the pipe hard against his neck, causing him to choke and drop his gun. She stomped a foot on top of it and held her ground.

Zokus' partner had his gun drawn but didn't fire; he stared at the two of them, confused, until Zokus croaked, "Stang it... just... get..."

"Get me my *money*," Kyra growled. She felt black anger well up inside her: anger for this stupid job, for Rugo, for the life she'd had in Axetown and all the years before coming here. It was familiar anger and she could keep it in check, just barely, even though she could have easily broken Zokus' neck.

"Do it... idiot..." Zokus rasped. "Get it."

The other Klatooinan lowered his shaking gun and sprinted out to the landing field. Kyra didn't budge and didn't relieve pressure on Zokus' windpipe. Half a minute later both Zokus' partners came back. They had their guns up again but she'd expected that. Zokus was a lot bigger than her and with him pinned in front they'd take off his head before hers.

"Throw the guns on the counter," Kyra said, and choked Zokus once for emphasis. "Do it now."



She loosened her hold enough for Zokus to nod. His thugs sourly tossed their weapons onto the counter, next to the other pipes.

"Now the ingots," she said.

The thugs looked to Zokus again. He gasped, "Just *do* it already!"

Scowling more, the second thug slung the bag off his back, opened it, and put it on the counter. Deftly, Kyra removed one hand from the pipe and grabbed one of the blasters on the counter. She used its barrel to prod open the bag and looked down at the collection of silver metallic slips. Eyes flicking back and forth between the money and the thugs, she took her time and counted everything up.

Finally, she dropped the pipe and pushed Zokus away. Her gun stayed up, level at his head. "We're good now," she said. "Don't come back here again."

The Klatooinan snarled. "I won't forget this, human girl."

"Neither will I. A deal's a deal. Go."

Zokus grunted, nodded to his men, and all three filed out of the shop. Kyra kept her blaster up and trained on them as they filed into their ship. She only lowered it once they'd pushed off on smooth repulsor-bursts and flown into Socorro's sky.

When she dropped the gun all energy left her. Kyra staggered over to the counter, pulled the bag of ingots to her chest, and collapsed on the floor. She counted the money again, hugged it tight to her chest. She found she was shaking, found hoarse gasps escaping her throat, laughs or cries. That was the last time she'd have to do something like that. It was all so close to over and her dreams of escape were all so close to true.

From over the counter she heard her creaky droid's voice say, "Excuse... tress Kyra, are... alright?"

"We're almost done here, Sleepie," she said between sobs. "I swear to every god, we're almost free."

Saijo was a deceptively peaceful world, with endless miles of rolling hills draped in vivid green grasses and carved by clear streams, only rarely interrupted by urban settlements. Strange, then, that it was one of the key worlds owned by the

Nagai, a race that had been chased out of its home star cluster nearly a century and a half ago, then invaded the greater galaxy. In sporadic movements since they'd been subdued by larger galactic powers, risen up again in search for more territory, and once more beaten back to the handful of systems they'd colonized in the Saijo Sector. For all their warlike habits there was a certain grace about the Nagai; they were a tall slender people, with pure-white skin and pure-black hair, and in battle they moved with a dancer's elegance.

Stranger still was that Saijo should be home to last cluster of Sith in the galaxy, though that was a secret very few knew. After the death of Darth Krayt, the newly-formed Galactic Federation Triumvirate had hunted the Sith as aggressively as the Sith had hunted Jedi a decade before. After the Battle of the Floating World, where the Sith had been led into a slaughterhouse, tricked by one of their own, this was their final bastion. Where there had once been hundreds of One Sith throughout the galaxy, they now numbered less than fifty.

Darth Talon derived no satisfaction from sulking around the galaxy in the service of vermin crime lords, but she did not enjoy Saijo either. It felt peaceful like a graveyard.

On her return from Vorzyd V she reported directly to Darth Nihl. Like the rest of their facilities on Saijo, the Dark Lord of the Sith's bunker was a blunt ferocrete structure, carved into the slope of one of the steeper valleys. Past the wide horizontal strip of its window, grass blew in the wind, shimmered in the sun. Talon tried to ignore the light and focus on Nihl. He embodied his people at their most fierce, a jagged nightmare in black and white.

"The payment from Black Sun is critical," the Nagai said. "With this we'll be able to fund more efforts across the galaxy. We will buy more ships, so our people may move more freely."

"Yes, Master," Talon said. She sat on the hard floor, legs tucked beneath her, and watched Nihl pace, a silhouette sliding back and forth across the bright window.

"You performed well," he said. "Now tell me about your apprentice."

"He infiltrated the governor's estate very ably."

“As well as you could have?”

“At that stage of training? Yes. I believe so.”

“Yet you had to intercede to help him.”

“He was facing six opponents on his own.”

“You could have killed them all, couldn’t you?”

“Yes. But he is an apprentice.”

“How many did he kill by himself?”

“Four. Two before I arrived, two after.”

Nihl stopped pacing. He narrowed his red-gold eyes in thought. “Did you sense hesitation in him? Was he reluctant to take a life?”

“If he were, he would be dead, or I would be injured.”

Nihl nodded. “Good.”

“Fallen Jedi have often made great Sith,” she reminded him. “Our Lord Krayt was one.”

“Krayt was a full Jedi Master before he joined the dark. Eli Horn is a boy. When we captured him and his fellow apprentices, he nearly broke down weeping.”

“He was the only one we spared,” Talon reminded.

She’d been there to watch as Nihl passed judgment over the captive youths; some apprentices had broken down, blubbering in fear. Others had stood up bravely in ways that would have made their masters proud. Eli alone had begged to join them. He’d been on the verge of breaking, yes, but when the red blade passed over him he’d stood up and declared that he wanted to renounce the Jedi and learn the power of the dark side.

When Nihl had asked why, Eli had said that the Jedi were weak, the Sith strong, and he did not want to be weak anymore. Sensing the boy’s emotions through the Force, Talon had believed him. So had Nihl. That did not mean either of them went easy on the boy or took his loyalty for granted, especially now that the Jedi had regained their old dominance.

“He does not hesitate to kill,” Talon said, “and he takes great pride in mastering his powers.”

“So do many Jedi.”

“There are powers only the dark side can unlock. Eli understands this. I can see it clearly. We do not have to worry about his loyalties.”

“And his abilities?”

“It may take some time, but I’m confident he will learn.”

“As long as you continue to teach him,” Nihl said. His small smile showed sharp teeth.

“If you will it, I will do so.”

“I will it.”

“Then I’ll do so.”

She’d wondered whether, once Eli’s training was complete, he’d been given the same task she’d been given: killing her master. It was something Darth Krayt might have done, but not Nihl, not when the Sith were so few and so fugitive. As a Sith, wholly pledged to serve a great design, that should not have relieved her, but it did.

Nihl looked away and went silent in thought. Talon waited; when he said nothing more she asked, “Is there anything else, Lord Nihl?”

“At this moment, no. You should continue his training on Saijo, but I’ll send you into the field soon enough.”

“More work for Black Sun?”

Nihl glanced at her. “Do I hear bitterness, Darth Talon?”

She thought to lie, then admitted, “Yes, Master.” She’d never lied to Darth Krayt, not in anything.

“None of us enjoyed consorting with vermin. We do what we must to survive. Besides, alliances with criminal syndicates have been fruitful for us in the past.”

“We’ve never depended on them so much.”

“No,” Nihl admitted, a tiny sigh. “We did not. And one day we’ll regain what we’ve lost, but you must be patient. The One Sith labored for a century before Krayt overthrow Roan Fel. The Banite Sith spent a millennia before their grand design became complete.”

Darth Talon did not have a century to wait, let alone a millennia. She did not mind sacrificing her remaining years in service of the Sith, but it pained her to know that she’d not live to see the inevitable triumph of the dark. It seemed unfair to know supremacy at her beginning, and for the rest of her life to be a downhill fall.

Nihl could never know her as well as Krayt had, but still he sensed her thoughts. “The Force is immortal; so are the Sith. The cause we serve unfolds over countless years. Sometimes

we must sacrifice our personal glories in the name of that good. This is what it *means* to be One Sith.”

He said it firmly, fiercely, but she felt that he was trying to convince himself as much as her. Darth Nihl had been a Nagai warlord once, their greatest in a hundred years until the Alliance and Empire had combined to smash his fleets and leave his ship drifting in cold space. Rescued by the Sith, he’d begun a new life, striving toward loftier goals than mere conquest. Yet still he often shown the impatience and bloodlust that had marked his old life.

Darth Nihl was a powerful Sith and a more fearsome warrior than Talon could ever hope to be, but he did not have Darth Krayt’s vision.

As soon as the thought came it brought guilt, shame, and fear that Nihl might have intuited it. She glanced up at him; he was staring at the ferrocrete wall again, lost in other thoughts. She’d been lucky.

She was about to ask to leave when she felt another presence approaching. She felt it reach out to Nihl, felt Nihl respond. With the lift of a hand, Nihl bid her rise, and she stood up just in time to see Darth Havok step into Nihl’s chamber.

Havok was another convert to the Sith. Once an Imperial Knight, the Iktotchi now bore the same scarlet and black tattoos as Talon, forever marking his allegiance to their order. Since Krayt’s death he’d become an especially close advisor to Nihl.

Havok looked at Talon, surprised by her presence, but Nihl said, “Speak.”

Havok bowed his horned head, then brought it up. “Dread Lord, our communication buoy at Mustafar has received a message. It appears to be from... Darth Maladi.”

Neither Talon nor Nihl could hide their surprise. As Krayt’s spymaster and chief scientist the secretive, manipulative Maladi had been one of the Sith’s most valued assets. Before Krayt had returned from death and killed the usurper Wyyrlok, Maladi had disappeared from Coruscant and Korriban to conduct some experiments in secret. Nihl had later explained that she’d been working on Wayland, at the site where she’d first corrupted the Jedi’s Vongforming

project a decade earlier. Her laboratory had been destroyed, and it was suspected that the rogue Jedi Cade Skywalker was responsible. Talon had not seen her since; over the past two years the surviving Sith had chased endless rumors hoping to learn what had happened to Maladi, without success. She was one of the few One Sith totally unaccounted for, along with Wyyrlok's daughter Saarai.

Talon's first instinct was to be skeptical. So was Nihl's. He asked, "Are you sure it is authentic?"

"The message was encrypted using proper codes and sent directly to the listening satellite we placed at the edge of the system," said Havok. "Few others could have sent it."

Nihl nodded grimly. The Sith had been forced to abandon many of their key worlds, but they'd left satellites at those sites to monitor activity and route communications to Saijo. That had been a contingency plan laid out long before Krayt died, shared only among his most trusted servants.

"What did the message say?" asked Nihl.

"It said to come to that location in exactly three standard days." Havok paused. "It may be authentic, but it may be a trap."

"Whatever the truth, this must be investigated," the Dark Lord said, then turned to Talon. "Go. Take your apprentice. Be ready for anything."

She bowed. "It will be done, Master."

Nihl signaled that she could leave. He'd stay with Havok, and the two would talk in private, probably sharing secrets they deemed her not worthy of. It stung, but that was more ego that needed to be purged in service of the grand design. Talon hurried from the room and tried to focus on what lay ahead.

Whatever Maladi had been doing these past years, she'd surely not been idle. Perhaps she'd arrived with some bioweapon with which they could turn back the tide. It was a sweet thought, and foolish, but Talon clung to it nonetheless. Even Sith needed hope.

Azlyn Rae had seen a lot of the galaxy, but she'd never been to Belgaroth. The planet was as far as you could get a desirable destination and still be habitable. Its oceans were

thick with sediment its continents barren. The air, while breathable, was polluted thanks to large-scale weapon-testings by the old Empire a century and a half back. The native inhabitants clustered in a single modest city and were apparently content to let history pass them by. The only thing that made it vaguely notable was its proximity to more rich and populous worlds in the Core. If there were still Sith lurking about, it made sense they'd be lurking here.

The moment their shuttle dropped out of hyperspace and Belgaroth's unhandsome grey-and-yellow sphere dropped into view, Azlyn's heart beat faster. Ganner was down here, somewhere. If not, he was most likely dead.

Whatever concern Tries Sinde felt, the older Knight buried it. He glided their ship into the atmosphere and set them down at the city's sole spaceport. Unlike Ganner, who'd arrived incognito in a scrappy civilian vessel, they flew a scarlet *Sigma*-class shuttle with Imperial roundels on all three s-foils. Sinde also sent a priority message to the port's commander as they neared, and once they set down and disembarked they were met by a harried-looking local defense force officer and a half-dozen grey-uniformed guards.

"On behalf of the government of Belgaroth I give you sincere greetings!" the officer bleated and struck a brittle salute. Sinde bid him at ease with wave of the hand. The officer lowered his arm but hardly looked relaxed. "It's an honor to meet two Imperial Knights, Master, ah—"

"I am Master Sinde and this is Master Rae. We've come here requesting your assistance regarding a vessel that has been docked here for the past fifty-one hours. It is a GPE-7300 cargo ship answering to the call sign *Scarlet Sun*. Please take us to its location immediately."

The officer's face scrunched into a thoughtful frown. "I... I'm sorry, Masters, but I don't believe we have any ship of that description currently berthed here."

It was Sinde and Azlyn's turn to frown. As soon as they'd left hyperspace they'd checked the signal from Ganner's ship to confirm it was still on the ground. There was no way it could have taken off in the past fifteen minutes without them catching it.

“However,” the officer said, “I believe a ship of that type *did* stop here within the past few days. If you’ll, ah, follow me.”

He led them through the bowels of the spaceport without further comment. Everything on Belgaroth seemed a rusty red-gray: the buildings, the inside walls, even the sky. The port’s flight control tower looked like it hadn’t been remodeled or even cleaned in fifty years, and when two scarlet-armored Imperial Knights stepped onto the deck, the staff fumbled to button their uniform jackets and stand at attention. Yes, if the Sith were hiding out here they wouldn’t have to worry about being spotted.

The officer who’d greeted them- and still not given his name- led them over a computer where they checked the port’s registry. Sure enough, a GPE-7300 called *Scarlet Sun* had docked at landing pad 4S. According to these records, it had departed a mere two hours later.

“That’s impossible.” Sinde couldn’t hide his surprise.

“I’m, ah, quite certain, sir.” The officer brought up a camera-feed from pad 4S. The craft sitting there right now was a disc-shaped Corellian ship with a half-dozen squat, crested Alanteen scurrying around. “This ship has been docked at 4S for the past forty hours.”

“Do you have footage going back two days?” asked Azlyn.

“Yes. That should still be in our system. One moment.”

The recording began a fast reverse, and Azlyn watched the timer in the screen’s bottom corner count backward. She watched the Corellian ship disappear, watched the pad sit empty, and then she saw *Scarlet Sun* replace it. The officer took them all the way back to its initial set-down; as he’d said, Ganner’s ship had been on the ground for just two hours.

The officer began playback at thrice normal speed. Azlyn watched Ganner’s figure emerge from the ship, familiar for its his tall thin frame and auburn ponytail despite the lack of red armor. When he stepped off the pad and out of view Azlyn asked, “Do you have cams for the whole of the port?”

“We do,” the officer nodded. “But security apparatus in the rest of the port is, ah... not exemplary.”



They watched in silence as the clock counted forward. When nearly two hours had ticked away the screen suddenly burst to static. It only lasted a second; then they watched *Scarlet Sun* push off into the sky with no clue who'd gone inside.

"That was... quite unusual," the officer muttered. "Our cameras are usually, ah, free of malfunction."

Azlyn looked at Sinde, scowling. There was plenty of technology that could jam low-grade holo-cams on a backwater spaceport. A skilled Force-user could do it too.

"Talk to your satellites in orbit," Sinde snapped at the officer. "See if you can get a heading for that ship when it jumped to hyperspace. I also want every second of security footage containing its owner."

The man was quick to obey when scolded. Using the security cams they tracked Ganner as he made his way out of the port and disappeared into the city streets. By the time they'd done that, the flight control satellite had determined that *Scarlet Sun* had jumped on a vector perfectly matching a trip to the Corellia system. That left five planets as potential destinations, assuming the ship actually *did* go to that system.

Azlyn's first instinct was to go back to their shuttle and race off in pursuit, but Sinde insisted on being methodical. First he had the officer show them to landing pad 4S. Then he and Azlyn proceeded to scour the area while the spaceport staff and the family of Alanteen watched in befuddlement. Azlyn and Sinde knew what to look for without either saying it aloud; if they were still getting signals from Ganner's homing beacon then the beacon must have been removed from *Scarlet Sun* and attached to a power source nearby so it continued to broadcast. Sure enough, they found the fist-sized device attached to a conduit inside an auxiliary access panel. Its activation marker pulsed a steady green light; Azlyn felt like it was mocking them.

Very few besides the Imperial Knights themselves knew about the homing devices placed in every Knight's ship. Whoever had taken Ganner's craft- and she prayed Ganner with it- had known what he was even though he'd travelled incognito. They'd also known someone would come looking

for Ganner and had taken steps to waylay Azlyn and Sinde as long as possible.

As far as Azlyn was concerned that was all the more reason to chase *Scarlet Sun* to the Corellian system, but again Sinde was thorough. He rounded up a group of local law enforcement officers, who were none too impressive but agreed to pound dirt looking for clues on Belgaroth. While Sinde intimidated Azlyn reached out with the Force, trying to sense traces of the man she'd known all of her adult life, the man who'd helped her and guided her when she'd needed it, the man who wanted more than friendship but had never pushed her where she wasn't ready to go.

Azlyn felt nothing at all. She didn't know what it meant.

When Sinde was satisfied they could get nothing more done on Belgaroth, they went back to the shuttle, kicked off, and set course for the Corellian system. While he plotted the hyperspace jump Azlyn drafted a summary report for the empress and cast it toward Coruscant. Then hyperspace envelope their ship, and suddenly there was nothing to do but wait.

"It's nine hours to the Corellian system," Sinde said as he leaned back in the pilot's seat. "Perhaps you'd like to rest, Master Rae."

She sat tense in the co-pilot's chair, looking out at the flashing light. "I'm not feeling very restful, Master Sinde."

"You should try anyway. When we get to our destination we'll have to contact each of the five worlds to see if a ship like *Scarlet Sun* approached in the past three days. That will take hours. I don't want you getting fatigued when you need to be at your best."

"I understand that." She didn't move from her chair.

Sinde sighed. "I understand you have an emotional stake in this mission. That's all the more reason not to make mistakes."

"With all due respect, Master Sinde, I don't think you understand." She didn't herself. For a little while, after becoming an Imperial Knight and resigning her Jedi past, things had started making sense. Then Cade Skywalker had blasted into her life, ricocheted out, and died before she could make sense of anything.

"Perhaps not," Sinde allowed. "But no matter what happens, you should face it like an Imperial Knight. Assuming you still are one."

Azlyn flinched and looked at the old man for the first time. She was surprised not to see cold judgement in his face, the kind she was used to seeing in Draco's. Instead there was curiosity, and a softness.

"The empress decided that we're now free to serve the Force however we choose," Sinde said. "It's no secret you've been spending time with your old master."

"No." Azlyn realized Sinde was on this mission not just to find Ganner but to sound out her intentions. There was a cool efficiency about it that was just like the empress. Despite that, she couldn't help but answer honestly. She looked down at the metal swell of her armor, the construction that kept her alive and said, "I owe the Imperial Knights more than I can say. Without the order I've have died twice over."

"Loyalty given from a sense of obligation is no loyalty at all," Sinde said. "If you can't give yourself wholly to our order it would be best for us all if you stepped aside. However, if you think it's in you to continue serving... I'm sure the empress would welcome that as well. But you have to choose from your own heart."

"I understand, Master Sinde."

"I hope you do." He sounded slightly doubtful. "I'm not a stranger to your dilemma, you know. I was a Jedi once." She blinked, surprised, which made him smile. "I should say, I was a Jedi *apprentice*. I'm an old man, and the Imperial Knights are younger than me. I've seen some of the Jedi, and much more of our order. I know neither group is perfect, and each has different things to offer to different people. Consider those things, and consider what kind of person you are, Master Rae. And when you're ready, make your choice. It won't be held against you."

Azlyn found her breath was tight; she hadn't realized how much she'd needed to hear those words. She blinked her eyes dry, gathered her voice, and said, "Thank you, Master Sinde. I suppose the empress tasked you with sorting me out."

He smiled through his beard. "Of course. She knows better than to leave sensitive talk to Master Draco."

She nodded, smiled back, and rose from her chair. There were bunk in the rear hold, simple but sufficient. She still didn't know if she'd be able to get any rest on the way to Corellia, but she would try.

## Chapter Four

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Nobody in their right mind said Mon Gazza was a pretty planet, but it got the job done. The heavy manufacturing and spice production hub hosted a busy spaceport with nearly as many cantinas as it had landing pads. It was dirty, busy, and nobody looked twice at a slim black-haired woman, a tall dark man in white armor, and a towering assassin droid as they pushed three heavy cargo crates through the port.

They were set to meet the buyer for their merchandise in this place, and it had been natural to set down here. The only berths available for *Free Agent* had been on the east side of the complex, opposite from the west-side landing pad where the buyer was waiting, and while Jao Assam wasn't crazy about having to push their precious cargo through this crowd, at least they weren't in a rush. They'd sent Sauk to purchase a replacement stabilizer coil and there was no telling how long that might take. Stabilizing coils themselves were standard parts, but *Free Agent* was not a standard ship and Sauk had warned he might have to ask around for the model he needed.

Nobody had tried to intercept them as they came in for landing, which was good, because without that coil *Free Agent* couldn't do much more than creep in a straight line. Jao wondered who'd been after them back at the planet and planned to ask their buyer about it when they met him.

Ania, meanwhile, seemed satisfied to have gotten this far. She held her head high as she pushed her repulsor-dolley along, and as they wedged through the crowd she told Jao,

“Once we get this done with I say we take a breather. Give Sauk time to fit the coil in and make sure *Free Agent*’s in peak shape. There’s got to be things to do on Mon Gazza.”

“I’m sure there are,” he muttered.

This spaceport alone seemed to have nigh-infinite cantinas, not to mention a dozen casinos. The one they were passing right now was projected a giant holographic image of a slobbering Hutt above their heads, which was apparently some kind of advertisement. Jao felt very far from the Imperial Knights’ training academy where he’d been brought up, but that was nothing new, not since he’d met Ania.

Even though he’d left the order with the empress’ express permission, he didn’t feel as though he’d abandoned it. He respected the organization, and respected the Knights with whom he’d worked, but they’d always told him that as a Knight his priority was the serve the Force above all else, even the empress. Time and again circumstance had pushed him into following Ania, and eventually he’d come to believe the Force was pushing him too. Where it would take him he didn’t know, but it seemed imperative he follow this path.

His Knights’ training had taught him to be alert at all times. As they worked their way through the spaceport’s busy halls and forums he kept alert, scanning the humans and aliens milling around them. He, Ania, and AG-37 made an unusual combination, and they were drawing some looks. Best he could tell, most of them were surprised ones, though a few lingered longer, thoughtfully. Jao was pretty sure they were being recognized. A year ago the battle against Darth Wredd and the One Sith- and the parts they’d played in it- had garnered an uncomfortable amount of attention on the news-nets. Ania seemed to run from fame faster than she ran from responsibility, which was why she’d insisted they take low-key and mostly-legal jobs on the fringe since then. That was fine by Jao; he was no attention-hound either.

He was relieved when they reached the west landing zone. The crowds thinned out and he longer had to worry about being recognized, or having someone accidentally tip over a crate full of Christophian crystal sculptures. AG-37, who’d downloaded a map of the port to his memory processor upon

landing, directed them down a series of long broad hallways until they finally reached their destination.

The landing platform looked like the one where they'd left *Free Agent*: broad, circular, walled on all sides with an open ceiling through which to lift off. Jao didn't recognize the kind of ship waiting there, but it was some kind of personal yacht, probably SoroSuub, probably expensive. The landing ramp was down and waiting as its base was a hunch-backed snout-faced Chevin flanked by two bipedal labor droids.

The Chevin lifted a clawed grey hand in greeting. Ania raised hers in reply. "Grep Nor, I presume?"

"This is correct." The Chevin's small eyes took in Ania, Jao, AG-37, the crates. "I will examine the cargo before payment."

"No problem." Ania slapped the lid of the crate in front of her but didn't open it. "One question first. Why did some sleemos try to kill us at Christophsis?"

Grep Nor blinked. "Please explain."

"Some guy in a fake police cruiser tried to pull us over. He said we were carrying contraband. When we tried to run for it his buddy came in a starfighter and almost shot us down. We barely made it out and blew out part of our engine escaping."

"On our way here we took a better look at those sculptures," Jao said. "We couldn't find anything wrong with them. Nothing secreted inside them."

Grep Nor sniffed. "You think I am a drug smuggler? Preposterous. I am an art dealer, nothing more, nothing less." He indignation sounded real, *felt* real in the Force, but Jao sensed he was hiding something.

Ania suspected something too. It was hard for even well-travelled humans like her to read Chevin faces but the Force read all. She glanced his way and he gave his head a tiny shake, indicating mistrust.

"The guy who gave us these sculptures on Christophsis says they were acquired legally," Ania told Grep Nor. "He even showed us a bill of authenticity. It's in this crate. Are you telling us you're absolutely certain that bill wasn't forged?"

“Absolutely. I’m not a criminal. The criminals were the ones trying to steal them. The sculptor was one of the best Christophsis ever produced. He died during the last war, you see, so their value’s skyrocketed.”

Ania glanced at Jao again. He sensed what the Chevin had said was accurate, but still not the whole truth. He wondered if this was even worth pressing; after the hassle of getting here, they both wanted to hand over the merchandise, collect their money, and go.

Jao gave Ania the tiniest of shrugs. She opened the crate, stepped back, and said, “You can look over the goods.”

The Chevin and his droids quickly got to work, checking each one for chips or cracks. They’d all been packed tightly in protected containers, and each had gotten through the bumpy ride without a scratch. Jao and Sauk had documented that on the way here, in case their buyer tried to renege on full payment.

He felt relief- his and Ania’s- when the Chevin finally stepped back and said, “It was a pleasure doing business with you. I have your payment right here.”

“Glad to hear it.” Ania put her hands on her hips and watched as the droids wrapped overwide arms around the crates, picked up their heavy weight with barely any strain, and moved them off the dollies into the ship.

Greph Nor took a datacard out from his robe and held it out. “Here is the access information for my credit account. You’ll see all the necessary payment is there.”

Ania took the card and plugged it into her datapad. As the last droid carried its crate inside the ship, her lips curved to a smile. “Payment accepted. Thank you for hiring us, Master Nor, but you’ll excuse us if we don’t-”

She never finished her sentence. A dozen men in blue police uniforms rushed through the door behind them and spread out in a loose circle around the four of them. All had blasters drawn and half of them were pointed at their client.

One man with officer’s bars declared, “Greph Nor, you are under arrest for purchase of stolen art.”

“Oh, you’ve got to be kidding me,” sighed Ania.

Another cop pointed his blaster at her face. “Hands in the air, Miss! Do it now!”



Another, less sure, added, "You too, droid."

Without a word, AG-37 raised both hands up. His heavy repeating blaster remained slung on the bandolier around his metal chest.

"This is an outrage!" Greph Nor was saying. "I purchased these works--"

"Knowing they'd been stolen from the artist's estate," the police captain finished. "Two guards were *killed* during the theft. Don't tell us you didn't know about that either."

"Who, hey," bleated Ania, hands still high. "That wasn't us. We're just couriers. Innocent, *ignorant* couriers."

The cop closest to her snatched the datapad from her hand. "This is proof you accepted payment for moving stolen goods. That's *also* illegal under Galactic Federation law."

"We had no idea these goods were stolen," Jao said as soothingly as possible. Tense situations like this were when Ania was most likely to do something rash. "There's a forged bill of sale inside those crates. We had no reason to doubt it. I realize ignorance is no excuse for committing crime, but it *is* a mitigating factor. I'm sure if you let us speak with a legal representative- and we're entitled to one, under Federation law- they'll sort all this out."

The police stared at him like he'd spoken Yuuzhan Vong. The one closest looked at his waist and asked, "Is that a lightsaber? Are you a Jedi?"

"No, I'm a-" He stopped. It was hard enough explaining things to himself nowadays.

That was when Ania did something rash.

Her high-kick knocked the blaster from the cop in front of her. At the same time she pulled her own blaster from its holster and popped a stun blast into the one on her flank. Jao ducked low, swore, and used a Force-push to knock the surrounding police off-balance. AG-37 hefted his rifle in an eye-blink and began firing over their heads. A few were already shooting back, and Jao used the Force again to knock one repulsor-dolley on its side and use its broad flat bottom as a shield.

Ania had a better idea. She jumped onto the second dolley and waved Jao to join her. As soon as he was on she switched off the thing's safety protocols and kicked power to

full. Ania clung tight to the control panel on the handlebar, maneuvering them at top speed through the spaceport hallways. Soon the police were out of sight but AG-37 was not; the droid's long metal legs carried him into an inhumanly fast sprint, and his metal feet pounded a trail of dents in the ferrocrete floor.

Ania crouched low over the control bar as she steered into the crowd, blaring the alert siren to clear the way. Jao ducked beside her, one arm around her waist for stead, and shouted over screaming pedestrians, "What are you *doing*? Every cop in the station is after us now!"

"At least we're not arrested!" She grinned like she was enjoying this.

As they burst into a large foyer a few police appeared and began shooting at them. AG-37 dropped them without breaking his stride, arms swinging at impossible-for-human angles for maximum firing range. As the errant dolley swung into a narrower hall Ania said, "Call Sauk! Tell him we're on our way!"

"I think the whole *planet* knows that now!" Jao snarled and fumbled for his comlink.

He didn't even get it out. Police appeared in front of them to block the way; Ania tried to plow through them but their laserblasts knocked the dolley's repulsors out of alignment. She and Jao went flying one way while the dolley went into a wall. He used the Force to turn their collision into an awkward skid, and when they scrambled to their feet they caught AG-37 in the midst of the police, dispatching them with stun bolts at lightning speed.

When the last one dropped the droid had his back toward them, but his upper photoreceptor swung around to see them and he said, "I am glad you're undamaged, but we really must hurry."

Footsteps and shouts from down the hall confirmed that. They started to run again, and Jao pulled his lightsaber from his belt. They swung around one corner, then into a new chamber, and in the hall beyond stood Sauk with a nice new stabilizing coil clutched against his chest. The Mon Cal froze where he was, jaw hinged wide.

“Stop them!” someone called from behind, and Jao ignited his lightsaber.

Ania cried, “Sauk! Get out here!”

Then the shooting started. Sauk stepped into the next chamber and saw Ania, AG-37, and Jao plus the squadron of police with blazing blasters right behind them.

“You get the part? We’re leaving, now!” Ania shouted, then pivoted to fire back at their pursuers. “Seems like we’ve picked up a bit of trouble!”

Jao stepped in front of Ania, covering her with his blazing white lightsaber. “Which way to the ship?” he called.

“W-We can cut through the cantina!” Sauk wave at the arch through which he’d just come.

“I suggest we continue our hasty retreat,” AG-37 said. He sounded as close to stressed as Jao had ever heard him.

“Agreed,” said Ania, and gave Sauk a shove on the shoulder. With Jao and AG-37 covering, the two of them charged back down the hall. Jao backstepped as quickly as he could, all the while deflecting laser blasts from the police. The sight of his lightsaber seemed to have put a scare in them but that wouldn’t last long, especially when more backup arrived.

When Ania and Sauk raced into the cantina, he did his best to follow. They went through the narrow entryway and followed Sauk toward the back exit, winding through an open aisle between sets of tables. Their appearance brought about a commotion; some patrons craned into the aisle to see what was happening, while others ducked back, anticipating violence. The police didn’t have any qualms of charging in, and they began pouring laserfire through the doorway as they approached.

Jao was still backstepping, covering Ania and Sauk with his saber, so he had a good view of what happened next. As the first policeman came through the door, someone sitting at the closest table- a human with dark skin and long black dreadlocks, gathered with a light-haired man and a woman with her face turned- stretched out his leg fake-casually and caught the cop in the shin. The cop overbalanced, tipped forward, and landed on his face. The ones right behind him

stumbled and fell on top of him, and soon the hallway was clogged with bodies.

Jao didn't have time to see what came next, or to send thanks to his rescuer, who'd probably just wanted to mess with the police. Instead he and AG-37 turned fully forward and sprinted after Ania and Sauk.

They reformed in the narrow hall beyond the cantina's back exit. Breathing hard, Jao said, "We got a little help back there."

"I saw," said Sauk. "It looked like- nevermind."

"What?"

"I think it was the guy who sold us the part." He slapped the stabilizer coil still held tight to his chest. "Let's go. I know the way from here."

As they started running again, relying on Sauk to guide them through the back corridors toward the landing zone, Jao asked, "How long will it take to install that stabilizer?"

"Fifteen, twenty minutes," Ania answered.

"Well, that's twenty too long!"

"*Free Agent* is still capable of takeoff," AG-37 reminded. "Only hard maneuvers are difficult."

"Well we're gonna need that. You can bet these cops will call air support." Through his panic Jao wondered how in the blazes Ania had thought they'd escaped when she'd kicked that first cop. Probably she hadn't thought at all. Ania wouldn't be Ania without her impulsiveness but sometimes she made him want to scream.

They heard laserfire behind them, slightly muffled. Jao looked behind him and saw nothing, but the cops had to be close. "How much further?" he panted.

"Almost there," said Sauk, "We're in the back of the east landing complex."

Jao was well and truly lost, so he didn't bother to argue. Sauk led them down one turn, then another, pushing past confused maintenance workers who jumped out of their way. When they finally reached a set of wide doors Jao felt himself flush with relief-

Then warning struck him through the Force. He skidded to a halt, grabbing Sauk with one hand and Ania with another, but it was too late. They skidded within range of the door's

activation sensors and they swung open, revealing a set of police waiting with blasters ready.

Jao pushed himself to the front and hefted his lightsaber again. He deflected some bolts with his white blade; AG-37 absorbed more on his hard casing as he marched up to the door's controls and manually shut them. Metal doors squeezed closed, blocking out the police, and the droid blasted the control panel before they could override.

Jao sighed with small relief; that wouldn't hold them long. "Is there another way?"

"I think so," Sauk said. "We can come around from the side."

"Then let's get going." Ania hefted her blaster and ran. There was still the sound of laserfire drifting through the hall, marking another firefight, but they had no choice but to run toward it.

Sauk led the retreat, though he was starting to tire and slacken his pace. Just as they reached a three-way fork in the path the laserfire took an immediate sharpness, and suddenly a brilliant pink-and-blue blur emerged around the curve and smacked hard into Jao. It was all he could do to shut off his lightsaber before he impaled the newcomer; both of them went tumbling, then slammed into AG-37's hard metal frame and dropped to the floor.

Jao disentangled himself from the other body, still claspings his lightsaber hard. He rose to a squat, shook his stinging head to clear it, and opened his eyes to get a look at the being crouched beside him at AG-37's feet. It was a woman, with vivid blue hair and a green outfit that left lots of bright-pink skin visible. Had to be a Zeltron.

"Blue!" he heard a voice call, and looked up.

First he saw Ania and Sauk, carried by inertia across the intersection. Then he made out two newcomers standing with them: the dark, dreadlocked man from the cantina and somebody else in the back, blonde-haired, mostly-obscured by his two friends. Finally Jao realized a river of laserfire was cutting in from the intersection's third branch, separating him and AG-37 from Ania and Sauk.

The Zeltron jumped to her feet and stared murder at Jao. "Stang it! This is all *your* fault!"

“My fault? Who are-” He remembered: the people in the cantina who’d helped them escape. He hadn’t missed them and neither, apparently, had the cops.

“Blue, come *on!*” shouted the dreadlocked guy beside Ania.

The Zeltron threw up her arms in frustration. Jao asked, “Are you trying to get to the docking zone?”

“No, I’m looking for the karking ‘fresher,” she snapped.

“More police are coming fast behind us,” AG-37 reported. “I suggest we face them head-on rather than allow ourselves to be trapped.”

Now Jao threw up his hands. The police had them split up and pinned down, and even if they got to their ship they’d never be able to run from airborne law enforcement.

“Sauk! Ania!” he called over the laserfire. “Get going! Get out of here!”

He saw the reluctance on their faces, and on the newcomers’. They were just as reluctant to split up their team.

But in the end the blonde guy in the back barked, “Stang it, let’s go! We’ll come around from the side and get you, Blue, I promise!”

The Zeltron looked like she wanted to snarl a dozen different curses, but she nodded. Ania, Sauk, and the two strangers ran down their branch. Meanwhile, Jao heard footsteps coming in behind him. Those cops had definitely breached the broken door and were seconds away from trapping him. Ania and Sauk might get away, but that was no comfort right now.

Because the droid seemed the only halfway-stable one, Jao spun on AG-37 and asked “What now?”

“I suggest you cover your photoreceptors.” The droid plucked a metal sphere from his bandolier.

“Is that a flash grenade?” asked the Zeltron.

“Indeed.”

“Why didn’t you use that *before?*” bleated Jao.

“Because I wouldn’t have been able to use it now,” AG-37 deadpanned. “This will disable them all briefly. Be prepared to run.”

“I can’t karking believe this,” snarled the Zeltron as police surrounded them from both sides of the hall. They had weapons raised and were shouting for surrender.

“Do it now,” AG-37 said, and Jao jammed a forearm in front of his eyes. Even with protection, the light washed the world away.

As she and Sauk chased down the hall after their sort-of rescuers, Ania admitted that she really needed to do a better job of vetting clients. It topped her list of resolutions, alongside keeping *Free Agent* stocked with spare parts.

“Hey,” she panted, “You guys have a ship around here?”

“No, we’re just running for kriffing exercise,” said the one in front, the sleazy-looking blond guy.

“I heard a flashbang behind us,” said the darker one. “Blue doesn’t have those.”

“Our droid does,” Ania said hopefully. “Maybe they got away. Are you sure it was a flashbang?”

“Jariah knows his booms,” said Blondie.

“We going back for her?” asked the other one, Jariah.

“Hold on.” Blondie pulled a comlink out of his longcoat and turned it on. “Blue, you alive? Talk to me, *mesh’la*!”

Between the pounding of feet and her own heavy breathing, Ania couldn’t make out the response. Blondie glanced back at her and Sauk. “They’re heading to your ship. Can you get it off the ground? Get to lightspeed?”

“Lightspeed is fine,” said the Mon Cal. “We can’t burn fast at sublight. This stabilizer coil—”

“Right, the reason we’re in this *grancha* mess.” Blondie snarled at his companion. “Good going, pal. ‘Helping out a client,’ you said! ‘Just messin’ with the cops,’ you said!”

“You thought it was funny!” bleated Jariah.

“For two and a half seconds. I—”

“That way!” said Sauk, jabbing toward a side door.

Blondie and Jariah pushed through the doors. This time they were in the main public hallway of the docking zone. No cops were waiting to catch them, but Ania spotted blue-uniformed figures far down the left end of the corridor and running toward them.

“Please tell me your ship’s not that way,” said Ania.

“It’s not,” said Blondie. He sprinted the opposite direction; everyone else followed. He brought his comlink to his hand and said, “Artoo, you there? We’re gonna need help fast!”

Ania missed the rest of what he said; laserfire began to cut in above their heads. She dropped into a running crouch and fired backward, but it didn't slow the police down much.

"Right this way!" Jariah said, waving an arm at a nearby portal. He and his friend turned hard right and ducked through. Ania and Sauk were right behind him, the police on their heels.

As soon as Ania got through the door Blondie grabbed her by the shoulder and pulled her behind the left side of the doorframe. Jariah and Sauk were already behind the right. Ania stumbled and nearly fell when her shins collided with the side of a blue-and-white astromech droid. She watched as a thin fibercable shot out from the droid's side, cut a horizontal line across the doorway at calf-height, and locked onto the opposite frame.

"Get ready, *pateesa*," Blondie said and hefted his blaster.

Ania was ready. Two seconds later the first police came charging through the door. They didn't slow and didn't see the tripwire. All three went falling; Ania, Jariah, and Blondie stepped out from their hiding places and unleashed a volley of stun blasts that took the standing cops down.

"Very nice!" Blondie crowed and slapped the astromech's dome. "Might not be some *yuna puna* assassin droid but he gets the job done. Let's get going!"

Ania wanted to ask about Jao and AG-37, but Jariah, Blondie, and the astromech were already on their way up the ramp of their ship. She took it in quickly: scarlet hull, wide wings, an oversized engine nacelle on the dorsal side. *Helox*-class, heavily modified, she prayed in all the right ways.

She looked at Sauk, saw his eyes full of questions. She had no answers, so she grabbed his shoulder and pulled him with her up the ramp. The ship was no prettier inside than out, but it would have to do. By the time she and Sauk reached the cockpit the engines were already warming up.

"Hold on tight, we're coming out hot!" Blondie said from the pilot's seat.

He had a grin on his face and bright eyes, like he was enjoying this. As she dropped into the seat behind him Ania realized that- despite the frenzy of their escape, despite its uncertain end, despite the fact that she'd turned no profit



whatsoever from a job that had twice almost gotten her killed – she might be enjoying it too.

The ship rocketed out of the docking bay, then dropped into a low swoop over the landing complex. Nearly all the recessed landing pads had ships in them, and Ania craned over the pilot's seat to spot AG-37's. Sauk spotted it first; he leaned over Jariah's chair and jabbed with one arm. "Do you see it? The VE-7800 model, answers to *Free Agent*."

"I see the ship." Jariah tapped something onto his comm console. "I think I got a lock. No police in the air yet, but that won't last long."

Blondie reached over the pounded the comm station with a fist. "Deliah, darling, you there?"

"I see you," a voice came back.

"Can you punch out?"

"Where's our friends?" Jao responded over the comm.

"We're here," Ania called. "Let's go!"

Cool and composed, AG-37 said, "Beginning liftoff now."

The view from the cockpit swung away from *Free Agent* as they circled back toward the landing pad. As they did pollution-thick Mon Gazza sky panned in front of them; Ania spotted a pair of approaching vessels blazing red and yellow warning lights.

"*Free Agent*'s gonna need cover as she runs," Ania said. "We've got weapons. Do you?"

"Bet your pretty butt I do." Blondie looked over his shoulder and his grin tilted toward angry. "*Cheeka*, you're going to owe us for this."

Before they took to the air, Jao has asked how much risk *Free Agent* had of blowing out its engine entirely if they fled from the cops. AG-37 had refrained from comment, which as far as Jao was concerned that was worse than no answer at all.

As they began a shuddering climb into the sky, a voice crackled over the comm. "We'll hang behind you, cover your butt with our canons."

"We have an offensive weapon on our dorsal hull," AG-37 replied. "Please drop below up and cover our ventral-aft section."

"You got it. You still got hyperdrive?"

"Affirmative."

"Once we're clear to jump, go to the Ando System."

"Agreed. We will exchange passengers there."

*Passengers* was as good a word as any. As he strapped into the co-pilot's seat, Jao glanced backward to see the Zeltron woman gritting her teeth. *Deliah Blue*. He recognized that name from somewhere, but had no idea where and right now there were more important things to worry about.

The climb through the atmosphere was aggravatingly slow, and from sensors Jao could see that the police cruisers were trying to get alongside them. The other ship, some *Helox*-class freighter, was doing a good job slipping from side to side, shielding them and preventing the police from getting a target lock. It looked like they might make it.

But as always, it was never that easy. One more police cruiser was coming at them from the edge of the atmospheric envelope. On Christophsis they'd been taken by surprise; not so now. Jao turned to the weapons station and had the laser turret ready to spray fire at the approaching ship. He released bolts of superheated plasma and he prayed the cruiser would turn away before taking fire; the police that were after them today were just doing their jobs, and he'd taken every precaution to avoid killing or hurting anyone thus far. The Imperial Knight in him knew this fiasco should never have happened, that there had to have been a better way of doing things, but the rest of him- that part that had been chasing Ania for two years- was almost a natural on the knife's edge.

His conscience was in luck; after taking a faceful of laserfire on its forward shields, the incoming cruiser broke off its attack run. At that point they were past the edge of the atmosphere and pushing out of lower orbit. *Free Agent* moved easier in the vacuum and pressed ahead toward waiting stars.

Jao looked back at the Zeltron and said, "We're going to make it."

Her response was a scowl and a grunt.

A minute later the red *Helox*-class freighter pushed ahead of them. The voice on the intercom said, "We're ready to punch out. You?"

“We are ready,” said AG-37.

“Then let’s get out of here,” said the voice, touched with relief.

Jaο felt it too; so did the Zeltron, Deliah Blue. He imaged that, in his own way, AG-37 did as well when the starlines exploded and they vanished into the safe distance of hyperspace.

## Chapter Five

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*Crimson Axe* made no pretense at being welcoming. The towering vertical blade of a ship jutted out from the mouth of a sarlacc pit and glowered down on the surrounding settlement. At the blade's peak there were a few appended landing pads for Rav's favorite visitors, but most beings, and all the denizens of Axetown, had to march across a broad metal bridge that crested the pit's rim before entering the lower levels of the former pirate ship.

Kyra hated the place. She hated the dirt and dim lights, the smell of sweat and booze, the broad bodies of swaggering criminals and the spine-tingling cackle of glitbiters indulging their habits in shadowed corners. The one good thing about *Crimson Axe* was that here alone she knew she was safe. Nobody tried to beat or steal inside Rav's home; he reserved that right for himself.

Kyra had locked the Chopyard up tight and left Sleepie in the shop. She'd take care of this herself, by herself. She knew Rav usually held court at a cantina inside *Crimson Axe* called the Golden Gorg. Rogu had said that using the messy, busy cantina as an audience chamber was very intentional on Rav's part. The scene feigned openness and oneness with all the criminals he consorted with, and more importantly, it was a statement that said *here I am, out in public, hurt me if you dare*. Very few dared, and the daring ended up dead.

Kyra had come here for what she was owed. The last of debt the Chopyard owed clanked in the pack at her back. She was acutely aware of the weight of their aurodium ingots as

she climbed the stairs into the Golden Gorg, just as she was aware of the curious looks she got from the cantina's clientele. She didn't belong here, and they all knew it.

She'd been in the cantina before; when she reached the main floor she looked around at the different spots Rav was known to set down with his hangers-on. Sure enough, she spotted him on the far side of the room, seated at the back of a semi-circular booth, squeezed between a Togruta and a Twi'lek woman. Each was showing lots of skin and some of that skin was marked with the red tattoo Rav stamped on all his so-called 'family'. He called the mark his 'bloody bones' and it took the shape of a X with curved-in tips. Kyra was a debtor, not his worker, and she was glad not to have his mark.

Nonetheless, Rav recognized her. His right eye was scabbed over with two slashing perpendicular scars but his left one went wide as she stepped close. A sick smile formed on his noseless green face.

"Why, hello there, *sweets patogga*." Rav waved her forward but didn't move from the back of the booth. "I don't see you often enough. How's Rugo's old Chopyard? Taking good care of it?"

Kyra stopped at the other side of the table and dropped her bag onto it. "This is everything, sir. My last payment. All in aurodium ingots."

Rav picked something from between his large white teeth, then gestured for the bag. His Togruta friend pushed it across the table and he looked inside, counting all the money.

He didn't say anything right away. Kyra's chest tightened. "This is everything Rugo owed you. It's done." *We're done*, she thought.

Rav leaned back and placed his hand on the bag. "This is *grancha* impressive, girl. I have to say. When old Rugo ended facedown I thought there was no way his little human girl could keep the place running, but you did. You've got a real talent for machines. Where'd you live before landing on my rock?"

"Lots of places."

"You run away from your parents?" he asked casually.

"They died in the war, sir. The last one." Common parlance had come to mark the 'last' war as the one between

the Alliance and Roan Fel's empire. The 'latest' war was the one against Darth Krayt.

"And you've been on your own all this time? *Very* impressive." Rav slapped the bag. "Thank you for the credits, and thanks for your service."

She felt dizzy for a moment. "You mean the debt's complete."

He exhaled through his grin, faux-regretful, and her heart fell. "Well you see, here's the thing. When I let Rugo have his place the Empire was still running things. They never really paid attention to Socorro. This was the untamed frontier. Now this Galactic Federation Triumvirate Union or whatever's in power and they're trying to set everything straight. Empress Fel, she's installed this new governor on Socorro who's making sure every resident's paying proper taxes and the like. Now, bribing *him* takes something extra, which means I've had to hike up the interest rate on poor Rugo's loan."

All breath left her; black rage reared up inside. "But... y-you..."

His eye narrowed. "What, girl?"

She shook her head, looked down. Her hands clenched to fists at her side. Fingernails dug into palms hard enough to break skin. "You never told me about this. I paid you *everything* I was supposed to."

"You did, girl, and it's to your credit. But business is business."

"I should be *free*!"

"And you will be, so long as you keep up the good work. It's just a little extra I need."

She stared down at the table; she didn't know what she'd do if she looked him in the eye. "How much?"

He named it. That was twice as much as she'd earned the past five months. She'd be lucky to pay it off in a year, and deep down she knew Rav would just raise the fee again. She wanted to sob and scream at once.

"Ah, don't get weepy. Let it never be said Rav made a pretty young *cheeka* cry."

Kyra heard him stand, heard his booth-mates slide out so he could get closer. His one mechanical foot clanked on the

floor as he moved. She still stared at the table, hands bleeding, shoulders trembling, and felt his rancid breath on her face as he loomed over her.

"I'll tell you what. I'm generous, so I'll let you pay that off a little faster. *Crimson Axe*, well, you can see she'd got age. Falling apart in lots of little places. I could use someone good with ships to fix up her up for me. When you're not doing work down at the Chopyard, come up here. I'll pay you a nice steady wage. Trust me, you'll work down the debt in no time."

Kyra shook, but nodded. Rav's rough green hand took her chin and forced her to look up at his grinning one-eyed face. "Cheer up, I'm doing you a favor. With looks like yours, you could turn a good side business here. I can set that up for you, *cheeka*, just give me the word."

Her hand shot up on instinct, knocking his away. The green palm came right back, slapping her in the mouth. Her head lashed sideways and her whole body spun to follow, but Rav's big fist caught her stomach in a sucker-punch. The punch stole her breath and pain stole her strength to stand. She fell, arms out, and grabbed onto the tabletop to keep from falling. She panted for air, struggled to stand, and felt Rav looming behind her, but he didn't touch her again.

"Show up at the *Axe* tomorrow. Bring a better attitude or don't come at all," the pirate growled.

Kyra pushed herself off the tabletop. Pain still spread out from her stomach; through tear-blurred eyes she saw the Togruta woman on one side, the Twi'lek on the other, watching her without pity.

"One more thing," she heard Rav say, as afterthought. "Give her some good ol' bloody bones. After all, she's part of the family now."

She heard him walk away, metal scraping metal every step. When she felt hands on her shoulders Kyra wanted to scream, but she no longer had the strength.

When they reached Ando it seemed like their unlikely rescuers had a place in mind for them to set down in. Ania watched from behind the pilot's seat as they shuddered into the atmosphere, soared toward far-ranging blue-green seas,

and finally came to rest on an artificially flat landing zone carved onto a volcanic island jutting out from the waves. Ania could see no other built structure, but she guessed this was some kind of old smuggler's rendezvous. The crew of this ship, which she'd learned was called *Mynock*, seemed the type.

Ultimately, she was just glad to get off this boat and back to the one she belonged on. *Free Agent* set down a few minutes after *Mynock* so the two ships faced each other across the black stone platform, and Ania was the first one down the ramp. The fresh salty air was welcome after polluted Mon Gazza, but moreso was the sight of Jao and AG-37 standing unharmed beneath *Free Agent*'s nose.

A pink-skinned Zeltron woman came out between them, burst past Ania and Sauk, and went straight onto the ramp of her own ship. Ania pivoted to see her throw herself into Blondie's arms and kiss him.

When the two disentangled, AG-37 stomped across the platform and said, "You have my utmost gratitude for saving my crew. I hope your ship was not damaged in the escape."

"Your crew?" Blondie raised an eyebrow.

"That is correct. I am called AG-37 and my vessel is the *Free Agent*. I apologize for all the inconvenience you've suffered. We were making a delivery of Christophsis crystal sculptures which we thought was—"

"I know, I already got the story on the way here." Blondie looked back at Ania and Sauk. It was the look she got from people who recognized her from her brief moment of galaxy-wide fame but there was something else there, she couldn't tell what.

Sauk didn't like that look either. He clutched the stabilizing coil tight to his chest and said, "It'll take time to get this installed. I'll go ahead and start."

The Mon Cal seemed relieved to scamper up the ramp into *Free Agent*, but the rest of them remained on the windy platform. A short silence swept across them, and then AG-37 said, "Was your ship damaged in the escape?"

"We came out alright," Blondie put his arm around the Zeltron's pink waist. "How about you, Blue? Get roughed up any on the way out?"



“Could have been worse.” Begrudgingly she added, “The droid’s quite the flier.”

“Why shouldn’t he be? I bet he’s got reflexes to put all ours to shame.”

Jao, quiet until now, took a step forward. “What’s your name, by the way?”

“Me? I’m Nat Starkiller. My crew here’s Deliah Blue and Jariah Syn. Deliah’s the pretty one, in case you didn’t guess.”

Jariah pouted, mock-sour, “I’m plenty pretty.”

“Anyway,” Starkiller said, “Am I supposed to guess who the rest of you are? ‘Cause I’ve got a pretty good idea.”

Ania crossed arms over her chest. “We’re just a crew trying to get by.”

“Aren’t we all?” he laughed. “From your story, it sounds like you made lotsa enemies and no credits on Mon Gazza. That’s a shame.”

“You mean you’re not going to ask ‘em to pay us back for all the stress and emotional turmoil?” asked Jariah.

Starkiller made a show of considering. “Guess we have to let ‘em pass for now. Or maybe not. I’ve gotta think about it.”

“Well, don’t think too long,” Ania said. “As soon as Sauk gets the engines running right, we’re taking off and looking for new work. Then we’ll never bother eachother again.”

“Sure. One more question though, and you can’t blame a *pedunkee* for asking.” Starkiller stabbed a finger at Jao. “White armor. Working lightsaber, and from what little I saw on Mon Gazza you know how to use it. I’ve gotta wonder why an Imperial Knight’s slumming around this part of the galaxy, selling stolen art.”

Jao said, “That’s none of your business.”

Starkiller grinned. “Thought so. Come on Blue, Jariah. I got something to talk to you two about.”

He took them by the shoulder and led them up the ramp. Ania watched them go, and watched the little blue-and-white astromech remain at the top of the ramp, as though it was curiously watching them.

She forced herself to turn from the droid and say, “Come on, let’s get inside and see how Sauk’s doing.”

AG-37 marched into *Free Agent* first. Ania followed, but before she could make for the engineering section Jao touched the back of her arm, stopping her in the corridor.

"What's up?" she asked.

Jao opened his mouth, snapped it shut, scowled, and tried again. "Were you okay back there?"

"I've been better, been worse. Nat Sleazebag didn't do anything weird, if that's what you're thinking."

Jao did the start-stop-start thing again. "It was a mess on Mon Gazza. We should never have let it get so bad."

"Yeah, I know. We definitely need to vet clients better. Everything they gave us *looked* convincing though, you have to admit that."

"I know. But Ania, we didn't have to run like that. If it weren't for those guys," he jabbed a thumb down the landing ramp, "we'd have never made it out."

"I know. But what did you expect me to do? We got caught committing a crime." Her voice went cold. "I've been to jail once. I'm not going back."

"I was trying to defuse the situation."

"With that lawyer talk? Jao, please. I did the only thing we could do."

He seemed unconvinced, but dropped it anyway. "Now what? We're almost out of credits and we should get a sector or two away from Mon Gazza before we start looking for clients again."

"Yeah, I know." She brushed bangs off her forehead. "I'll think about it. Maybe A-gee will know someone who can hire us."

"Maybe," he said glumly.

He was still so Imperial in so many ways, always wanting a plan and rules to work inside. He didn't belong out here but he was still with her, still with *Free Agent* for reasons she still didn't fully understand and suspected he didn't either. Ania smiled and put a hand on his shoulder. "C'mon, we've been through way worse than this. Cheer up. We'll figure out something."

"Of course." He glanced over his shoulder, back down the ramp.

"What? Something with Nat Sleazebag?"

He hesitated again, and finally said, "We'll talk about it later. You should go check on Sauk."

"Right," she nodded, though she wanted to press more. Instead she went back to the engineering section and checked on the Mon Cal mechanic. He was deep into his work but happy for a second set of hands, and together they completed the device's installation in nine standard minutes.

As they emerged from the engine room Sauk was saying, "We should dry fire the engines first and do some atmospheric test flying before leaving the system."

"I don't think that will be a problem," Ania said as she wiped engine grease from her hands. "We need to figure out where we're going anyway. Jao says—"

She froze when she saw AG-37 and Jao standing at the far end of the hallway near the cockpit entrance, talking to Jariah Syn. When he saw them, *Mynock's* crewman waved them forward. "Just came aboard to say thanks again," he explained, "and to extend an invitation."

"What kind of invitation?" Ania asked. It was hard to miss the scowl on Jao's face. It was deeper than ever.

"Come aboard *Mynock* and we'll talk." Jariah flashed a smile. "We'll throw in a little ale on the house."

Two minutes later they'd migrated into *Mynock's* crew lounge. AG-37 remained on his feet by the entry doorway; Ania, Jao, and Sauk took the sofa along the outer wall. A stout astromech, which Deliah called R2-D2, rolled around with a serving tray attached to his dome, allowing the guests to pour themselves tumblers of Corellian whiskey. As far as hospitality went, it was better than Ania expected. Which meant their hosts had a very questionable offer.

Jariah and Deliah stood against the inner wall and let Starkiller do the talking from the center of the room. Tucking thumbs in his beltline he said, "If you need credits, we've got a way you can score big. All you'd need to do is help us with a little job we were about to start before Jariah here thought it'd be funny a trip up some cops."

Jariah shrugged. Starkiller went on, "Basically, what we'd need you to do is simple. We've got some cargo. We need you to sell it. The buyer's gonna make you bargain for it, so

be ready. Whatever you end up selling it for, you get to keep. One hundred percent.”

Nothing was ever that easy. Ania could feel Jao ready to jump in with objections, so she asked, “You have a buyer picked out already?”

“That we do. He’s on Socorro and his name’s Rav. Feeorin. Technically ex-pirate, but he deals with lots of illegal merchandise.”

“We’ve had our fill of handling illegal cargo,” Jao said acidly.

“Not for the credits our goods’ll fetch,” Starkiller said.

Ania didn’t like his confidence. “What goods?”

“In our hold we’ve got two crates full of treasure we grabbed from the Sith temple on Coruscant right after Darth Krayt went bye-bye.”

Ania’s jaw dropped. Jao nearly shouted, “You want us to sell *Sith* artifacts? Those are-”

“*Really* illegal,” Sauk swallowed.

Starkiller nodded. “Ever since the new Triumvirate Alliance Whatever took over, they’ve made trafficking Sith stuff an automatic ticket to prison. Only guys like Rav will handle it, and if something’s *that* illegal, guess what? Value on the black market skyrockets. We’ve been sitting on ‘em for over a year, waiting for things to cool down a little before we try unloading them.”

“They’re illegal for a reason,” Jao snapped. “They need to be destroyed. If we sell them to this pirate, there’s no telling who will buy them up. There still might be Sith out there, and if these artifacts get back to them-”

“That’s not going to happen,” Starkiller interjected.

“How can you guarantee that?” He looked to Ania. “This is crazy. These people-”

“What are you going to do, Imp *bukee*,” asked Jariah. “Sic your empress on us?”

“I have several observations,” AG-37 joined in. His electric voice cut cold through heating tempers. “First: I am familiar with this Rav, by reputation only. I know his pirate gang was once quite fearsome, and that the members marked themselves with red X-shaped tattoos called his ‘bloody bones.’” His top photoreceptor swiveled toward Starkiller.

"You have such a mark on your arm. So, too, does your friend."

Jariah nodded. "Okay, you got us. Me and Nat used to crew with Rav. That was a long time gone and we don't want anything to do with him anymore- except his credits. That's why we need a fence."

"Your explanation is plausible," allowed AG-37. "My second observation: 'Sith artifacts' is an extremely vague term. What does this looted collection consist of and how can we- or Rav- be certain they are authentic?"

"Does it matter?" Jao said. "We can't take part in this."

"They're real as can be." Starkiller looked over his shoulder. "Deliah, Artoo, fetch our guests a sample."

The Zeltron nodded and stalked out of the room. The astromech was on her heels, half-full bottle of brandy still rattling on its tray. To his guests Starkiller said, "It'll just be a minute."

"Good." Jao got to his feet. "We'll be right back. Ania?"

She rose and followed him out of the crew lounge, all the way through the cargo hold and the open landing ramp. She was afraid he'd march all the way back to *Free Agent* but instead he stopped halfway down its slope, grabbed a landing strut, and swung back to face Ania.

"We absolutely cannot do this."

"I'm not big on handling Sith stuff myself," she admitted, "But stang it Jao, we need money bad. Socorro's not too far and-"

"Ania, I don't *like* that guy."

"I don't think he likes you either. That evens out, right?"

He grabbed her by both shoulders, pulled her close, and dropped his voice to a whisper. "Ania, he's not who he says he is."

She blinked. "What does that mean? Have you seen him before?"

"Not in person, but during the war, every Imperial Knight was told to be on the lookout for him and his ship. That's not Nat Starkiller. That's *Cade Skywalker*."

"Cade Skywalker? Isn't he dead?"

"They never found a body. They say he flew Darth Krayt into the heart of a sun. But that's Skywalker right there, I'm

sure of it, and he's apparently got a bunch of Sith merchandise in his storage locker. For all we know he's got Krayt stashed somewhere too."

"Whoa, hey, I thought Skywalker was a Jedi. Or something."

Jao shook his head. "The Empire never knew *what* to make of Skywalker. I don't think the Jedi did either."

Ania didn't too, and she realized that, for Jao to have pulled her out here to tell her this, neither did he. He was angry and confused and indignant, and also morally appalled at selling Sith artifacts. He needed help, and this was his way of asking for it.

Ania knew exactly what to do. "Well," she said, "Let's go find out."

She pulled away from Jao, hurried back up the ramp and into the main hold. Deliah and R2-D2 had reappeared, and the droid's drink tray had been replaced with a casket as wide as its body, held up by two extended arms.

Ania walked right up to the astromech but didn't open the casket. Instead she looked at their host and said, "First things first. You're Cade Skywalker, right?" His smug, scruffy face froze in surprise, which was pretty gratifying to see. Then she asked, "Why aren't you dead?"

Skywalker stared for another moment, then broke out in a laugh. Deliah and Jariah, even Sauk and Jao, stared blankly at him. Finally Skywalker shook his head, grinned, and said, "Shoulda figured a karking Imp Knight would know me. Well, you can't blame a guy for trying."

"Why aren't you dead?" Jao repeated. "What happened to Darth Krayt?"

"I flew the *murglack* into the heart of a sun, no need to thank me," Skywalker snorted. "I went EV before it happened. Blue, Jariah, and Artoo plucked me out before my air ran dry."

"And you let the whole galaxy think you're dead since?" asked Ania.

"Pretty much." He crossed his arms. "I never wanted to be some *grancha* Jedi hero and I never wanted a special destiny. Well I had it, I fulfilled it, and that's all. I'm done. I'm

retired and looking for my big payday. Gonna buy myself a moon somewhere and settle down.”

He said it like he challenged her to argue. Ania didn’t. Some people had said she’d been meant for something special too; all she’d wanted was a life to call her own. She believed Skywalker instinctively.

At least, as far as that part went. She sat back down on the sofa, took a strong sip of whiskey, and said, “Okay. Let’s see what’s in that case.”

“Right after we rescued Cade we went back to Coruscant,” Deliah explained. “Everything was in chaos and we sneaked into the Sith Temple pretty easy. Helped that Cade knew a back way in.” She pulled the lid away carefully. “Founds lots of stuff, but this was the crowner.”

Ania peered inside. She was a trio of pyramid-shaped devices, each as wide at the base as her hand. They were made of some black substance she didn’t recognize, mirror-smooth, with veins of red circuitry visible at the edges.

Jao seemed to deflate onto the seat next to her. She asked him, “What are these things?”

“Sith holocrons,” Jao breathed. He glared suspiciously at Skywalker. “Have you taken a look inside these?”

“A little.” Skywalker shrugged. “Typical dark side stuff. Embrace your anger, use your hate, blah blah blah. Kinda boring, really.”

Ania reached for the one in the middle. When Jao didn’t slap her hand away she picked it up by the corners and held it in front of her. “I don’t get it. What’s supposed to happen?”

“They only open themselves to Force-users,” Jao said gravely.

He was staring hard at the thing. Deliah prodded, “Go ahead. Don’t be shy. When you make your sales pitch to Rav, make sure to give him a demonstration. No way he’ll doubt they’re authentic after that.”

“Make that thing talk and you can take Rav for all his credits,” Jariah agreed.

Slowly, cautiously, almost reverently, Jao took the holocron from Ania. At first nothing happened. Then a rosy glow seemed to spread from the pyramid’s heart. Light emerged from its seams, converged upward, and assembled

into a holographic image above the peak. The light took on a human form: a human woman, older, with a hood lowered to cover most of her face and two thick braids falling off either shoulder. A voice said, "My name is Darth Traya. For what purpose to you seek my knowledge?"

"Is this a spirit?" asked Sauk, awed.

"No," Jao swallowed. "It's just a recording. An interface. But that Sith put all her knowledge into this." He handed the thing back to Ania; she was frankly relieved when its light faded to nothing. Jao told Skywalker, "These should be destroyed. *All* your Sith artifacts should be destroyed."

"Believe it or not, Imp *bukee*," Skywalker said, "I agree with you. And I'm gonna make sure it happens."

"You said you want us to sell it to this Rav person," Sauk said.

Skywalker looked to Jariah, then to Deliah. The Zeltron said, "Might as well give 'em all of it."

"Okay then," Skywalker exhaled and put hands on his hips. "Here's the deal with Rav. He's a one-eyed *grancha sleemo* but he's no fool. He's also absolutely filthy rich, which is why we know he'll pay a high price for these Sith artifacts. Little while after Jariah and I left him, he stumbled on some ancient treasure ship. Rumors say it was from the *old* Old Republic and was full of bullion. Aurodium, nova crystals, the works. Once he landed that, Rav settled down to comfortably retire. That was about ten years ago and he's been on Socorro ever since. Parked his ship, the *Crimson Axe*, into an old sarlacc pit and made himself lord of the wasteland.

"The thing is, nobody knows where Rav *keeps* his bullion. It's gotta be somewhere on Socorro. Rav wouldn't hide his nest egg where he couldn't keep half an eye on it. It's gonna take him a while to find a buyer for the kind of merchandise we're selling, probably months, and we're betting everything that he'll stash the Sith goods in his secret storehouse in the meantime."

"This aligns with my data files on Rav's career," AG-37 put in. "I take it you propose to place a tracker in your merchandise, use it to locate Rav's storehouse, then steal everything you can fly away with."

"Smart droid." Jariah grunted.



"Thank you," AG-37 said blandly. "However, I foresee several difficulties. It is likely, but not certain, he will place the Sith artifacts in the same place as his bullion."

"Sure," Skywalker said, "But I'm willing to take the risk."

"You said you'd let us keep all the credits we get for fencing your merchandise," Ania said.

"That's right. I'm after the big score or nothing."

"You must really hate your old boss," muttered Sauk.

Skywalker smiled angrily. "You'd be right. This restitution's a long time coming."

"Another difficulty," said AG-37, "is that Rav will certainly notice a tracking device when he inventories what he's bought."

"Less likely when he doesn't know what the kark he's looking at," Deliah smiled. "We've got a couple old bladed weapons in another case. Lanvaroks, I think they're called. I opened the hilt of one up and stuck a passive tracker inside, the size of my fingernail." She lightly flicked R2-D2 for emphasis. "It'll only respond to a signal from a matching device we've hooked into Artoo's computer matrix. He'll be able to patch it into a topographic map of Socorro and tell us exactly where Rav's stashed our goods."

"I am familiar with such devices," said AG-37. "They were developed by Alliance intelligence."

"Older tech, then," Ania said.

"*Rebel* Alliance. Quite old," AG-37 agreed. "I doubt Rav will think to look for it."

She realized that AG-37 was warming to this crazy idea; then she realized she was too. All these people were asking for, really, was for them to do the easy part. After that they could walk away, having made more money more easily than she'd ever thought possible.

Jaot, though, said, "The Sith artifacts have to be destroyed."

Skywalker nodded. "And when I break into Rav's storehouse and rob him blind, I'll be sure to throw a thermal detonator into those crates of Sith *poodoo* and blow 'em to hell. Problem?"

Jaot's problem was obvious. He didn't trust Skywalker.

"Listen," Ania said softly, "I don't know if we can walk away from this."

"We can't," Jao said, then looked to Skywalker. "We're in this all the way or none at all."

Deliah snorted in disbelief. Jariah opened his mouth to object but Skywalker held a hand to quiet him. "I offered everything you can get Rav to buy for. Don't expect us to split our big score seven ways."

"Fine," said Jao. "Split it four ways. Ania, Sauk, A-gee and I will all share the last quarter."

"Who, hey," Ania said, "That's giving them a little much."

"We'll still keep everything from the initial sale," Sauk reminded.

"No, I like this idea." Skywalker grinned again, probably happy Jao had surrendered so much so fast. "Blue? Jariah? You good with this?"

"I can live with it," the Zeltron said thoughtfully.

"As long as they pull their weight around," Jariah said, a little reluctantly.

"Got a feeling the Imp *bukee* will do anything he has to make sure the Sith gear gets vaped," Skywalker grinned. "Am I right?"

"You're right," Jao nodded firmly, and didn't break from Skywalker's gaze.

Tense silence filled the hold until Ania coughed into her hand and said, "I just want to get rich."

Finally Skywalker's eyes shifted to her. "You and me both, *cheeka*. We do it all right, and we all get what we want. No better kind of job than that."

## Chapter Six

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The Corellian system hosted five inhabited planets and sat astride multiple interstellar trade routes. Dozens of ships arrived every hour, vectoring to any of the five worlds or to the elaborate Corellian Engineering Corporation facilities located mid-system. There was no way of guessing where a single GPE-7300 light freighter outbound from Belgaroth would go. There wasn't even certainty it had arrived in the system at all.

Nonetheless, it was the only lead they had to chase, so Azlyn Rae and Treis Sinde did what they could. They flew their *Sigma*-class shuttle to Corellia first and contacted planetary flight control to see if a matching vessel had entered their airspace within the past three standard days. They were Imperial Knights, broadcasting the priority codes of Empress Fel herself, which commanded immediate compliance even from the notoriously contrarian Corellians. Nonetheless, it took planetary control a few long minutes to go through their flight logs. In the end, they reported that no GPE-7300 had landed on Corellia within the specified time frame.

There was no way to know if the flight records were accurate, or if the Corellians were telling the truth. All they could do was trust. From Corellia they flew to Selonja and repeated the same process, commanding local flight control to search its records, waiting while they did so, and finally getting a negative comply. After that it was Drall, and after an aggravating wait they came up empty again.

After Drall they made for Talus and Tralus, the twin worlds and the least-populated in the system. Once they had both swung in opposing orbits around an ancient space station called Centerpoint, but a century ago, after unknown millennia of existence, Centerpoint had been destroyed in the Second Galactic Civil War. With the loss of their centrifugal focus the twin worlds could have pulled apart into separate orbits, but the massive repulsor generators installed in their planetary crusts, apparently as old as Centerpoint itself, had activated and locked on to each other. Over the past century scientists had watched the twin worlds dance around each other as they circled Corellia's primary, waiting for a shift in their orbits that had yet to come. Apparently whoever had created the Corellian system all those eons ago had known what they were doing.

Talus was the more populated of the two largely agrarian worlds, and they contacted it first. It had been five hours since they'd arrived in-system, and in that time most of Azlyn's expectations had been drained away. While Master Sinde spoke with Talus flight control she sat in the co-pilot's seat, silently and grimly pondering how they could find Ganner once they turned up dry here.

She was surprised, then, when the flight controller's prim voice reported that a GPE-7300 light freighter had, in fact, landed in the city of Nashal two and a half days ago and had not since departed. With their authorization they compelled local security to lock down the ship in its berth and immediately set course for Nashal.

Azlyn pulled up a map and report on Nashal as they came in for landing. The city clung to the bend in a wide river. It was large by Talus standards but tiny compared to ones like Coronet on Corellia. It hosted a university, a medical research center, and headquarters for various local industries. It seemed like one of countless unremarkable mid-sized urban areas in the Core. Why Ganner's kidnappers had taken him here, she couldn't begin to imagine.

When they set down, local police were waiting to take them to the locked-down freighter. As promised, it sat on its landing pad, surrounded by a mix of human and Selonian deputies who clearly had no idea why they'd been

commanded to secure the ship. Azlyn couldn't even say it *was* Ganner's freighter; the GPE-7300 wasn't a common model, but wasn't a rare one either.

The landing ramp was retracted and shut. Sinde wasted no time; using the Force, he wrenched the thing free of its locking mechanism and lowered it to the ground.

The officer who'd escorted them was clearly impressed. "Will the, ah, Master Knights be needing our assistance?"

"We will go in first," Sinde said. He already had his lightsaber in his hand; so did Azlyn. "Stand by to assist if we request it."

The officer seemed eager to step aside. He'd probably never seen a Force-user in his life and neither had his deputies. Azlyn sensed that they just wanted this problem, whatever it was, to go away.

She turned her attention to the ship itself. She reached out with the Force, sensing for life inside. She felt nothing; when she glanced at Sinde, he shook his head.

There was nothing to do but go inside. Sinde walked up the ramp first; Azlyn was right behind him. Together they stepped into the freighter's cramped interior. Azlyn had used a ship of this type once and she was familiar with its layout. She moved for the cockpit and found it empty. She ran her hands over the control panels, trying to pick up any sense of who'd last used them, but she found nothing still.

Sinde called her name and she hurried to the cargo storage bay in the rear of the ship. She found Sinde standing in a chamber that seemed entirely empty, and she didn't know what to make of it. Then she saw what lay at his feet in the center of the deck: a single lightsaber. When she stepped closer she could tell it was Ganner's.

"I don't understand," Azlyn said. "Is this some kind of... message?"

"I had the same thought. The rest of the ship seems thoroughly cleaned."

"At least we know for certain they took Ganner here."

"We know they took his *lightsaber*."

Azlyn swallowed. The thought of Ganner already dead in some pit in Belgaroth had never left her. "We need to search every square meter of this city."

"I don't think we have to manpower for that, even with the police's help. But we'll certainly start an investigation." He looked down to the lightsaber. "Would you like to take it?"

Azlyn bent low and picked it up. She tried to sense Ganner's lingering presence on the weapon; again she found nothing. All she could do was hook it on her belt, beside her own.

After that they began the investigation. They searched the shuttle's logs and found nothing useful. The port authority checked security footage from the landing pad and found that it had been scrambled shortly after the ship's set-down; after that, no one was seen going in or out of the craft.

They had no leads and no idea where to search. It was like Belgaroth, but even worse. It seemed they'd been led to a dead-end, but that didn't explain why Ganner's lightsaber had been left them to find, unless the one they sought merely wanted to taunt them. Her instincts said this was a Sith scheme, and Sinde agreed a Force-user was almost certainly involved, though he pointed out that there were more than three such schools in the galaxy.

Azlyn wasn't calmed by the old Knight's reminders. Though the Force had stubbornly refused to advise her so far, she tried one more time to gain some insight. While Sinde went onto the streets of Nashal to help oversee the police investigation, she sat down in the hold of Ganner's shuttle, legs crossed and back straight in a meditative position. She let Ganner's lightsaber rest inert in her lap and tried to focus on the weapon, the man who'd wielded it.

She pulled memories out of her mind, made them into talismans and bound them together in the hope it would help her seek out Ganner's presence. She recalled when he'd taken her aside after an early training session to advise her on the differences between Jedi and Imperial Knight. She remembered when he'd come to Kiffu after her wounding and disfigurement to take her back to the only home she had. And she remembered how they'd fought side-by-side at the end of the war, at Taivas and Coruscant, and how the Force had flowed easily through them as the necessity of survival and sureness of their cause erased all the walls that had so long stood between them. She remembered that flow,

remembered the feeling, and tried to trace the flow and feeling to Ganner now, wherever he was.

She felt her awareness spread all over Nashal, every street and alley and inside room, groping for the remembered sense of Ganner Krieg. Yet in all those places she was empty, and in defeat she allowed her awareness to begin retreating.

And then, suddenly, something snagged. It was another Force-presence she remembered, one she knew well. She'd not been expecting it and at first didn't believe it, but when she reached out to touch it she felt it touch back, as surprised and uncertain as she was.

Azlyn immediately rose to her feet. Taking both Ganner's lightsaber and her own, she hurried out of the freighter, past the cordon of police deputies, out of the spaceport and into the city. She thought about comming Master Sinde but refrained, even though she knew, as the junior Knight, she should have informed him of what she'd found. Not yet, she told herself. Once she'd sorted this out, he'd know.

The crowd in Nashal's streets was a mix of human, tall furry Selonians and squat furry Drall. All of them gave Azlyn wide berth as she passed. She knew she drew attention for her scarlet armor, for the scars that laced her face, and normally the looks bothered her, but now she ignored them. A part of her still reached out to touch familiar presence, and she felt it become firmer as she grew physically nearer. Finally the connection became a rope, and as surely as a fibercable it pulled her down emptied sidestreets unerringly until she reached a single alley.

Standing its far end was a single figure, a blue-skinned Twi'lek male whose loose brown cloak mostly hid his pale Jedi's tunic. Azlyn didn't need that to recognize him; she knew Shado Vao for his Force-presence and his face, had known them since they'd both trained as children at the Jedi academy on Ossus.

Trained with Cade.

She ignored the ghost standing between them and closed the distance. Shado said, "It's been a long time, Azlyn."

"I know. What are you doing here? Are there more Jedi?"

Shado didn't answer right away. His veiled distrust made sense; the Jedi and Imperial Knights, despite both being part

of the new triumvirate, were separate orders that looked after their own interests. The Jedi welcomed Azlyn when she came back to their rebuilt temple for talks with Master Tuum, but this was different. Whatever had drawn Shado to Talus, it was as important and secret as what had drawn Azlyn.

She realized that, and she realized how unlikely it was that they'd been drawn here on anything but the same business. "I came here with Master Sinde," she said. "We're looking for one of our Knights who was kidnapped. Ganner Krieg."

In telling the truth, she'd given him permission to do the same. Shado said, "I'm here too with more Jedi. We're looking for one of *our* missing knight."

"Ganner went to Belgaroth to investigate reports of Sith activity."

Shado scowled. "Our Jedi, Kel Yobis went to Nubia."

"Looking for Sith?"

"Supposedly."

Azlyn sighed, suddenly angry. "If we're both chasing Sith, what are we doing *here*? Why would they kidnap our people and take them to a place like Nashal?" This unremarkable city on its unremarkable planet felt as far from Korriban or Dromund Kaas as could be.

"I have no idea," said Shado, "But we've chased the Sith into deep hiding. Who knows what kind of allies they could have here?"

"Where are your other Jedi?"

"We split up to search the city. Yobis' master is here. We were hoping, with her strong Force connection to him..." Shado trailed off, shrugged. They'd been having as little success as Azlyn.

"Master Sinde just commandeered the entire Nashal police force to help us look," Azlyn said. "I should call him. Tell him we've got a Jedi missing too. Are you sure Yobis is still on the planet?"

"Only that the ship he came in on hasn't left in four days."

Azlyn frowned thoughtfully. "They brought Ganner here two and a half days ago. At least, we think they did."

Shado looked at her waist. "Is that his lightsaber?"

"It is." She touched it and felt irrationally embarrassed. Shado knew more of her complicated relationship to Ganner-



and to Cade- than she liked. She straightened and said, "I should call Master Sinde now. If that's not a problem."

Shado sighed and shook his head. "No," he said, "I think we're going to need all the help we can get for this. Even help from each other."

This far on the edge of the Mustafar system, even its namesake planet, black and red in molten swirls, was reduced to a faint warm speck that barely stood out among so many stars. The communications buoy the Sith had planted here drifted through space in a long, lazy orbit around the system's primary. It was no larger than a snubfighter and could easily have spent eternity circling through void, utterly ignored.

Because they'd not known what to expect, Eli and Darth Talon had arrived here in a *Nemesis*-class patrol ship with enough room for passengers. It was the kind of ship used by fringers and criminal elements all across the Outer Rim and would not draw much attention, even if someone chanced near enough to notice them. As he stared out the viewport at the endless expanse of black and starlight, Eli doubted there was much chance of that.

When they arrived from Saijo they found nothing besides the buoy. They set themselves to wait. Eli had spent the ride growing tense with anticipation. He'd known Darth Maladi only distantly; she'd been secretive and aloof from other Sith, in ways he understood grated on her fellow dark side-users, but all had respected her genius.

Whether Darth Talon was agitated, Eli couldn't say. His master was a blank wall to him, inscrutable in the Force. Despite the red and savage markings on her skin hers was a cold beauty; though a part of him desired her, she intimidated him more than anything. She'd been raised Sith from birth, Darth Krayt's perfectly molded assassin, and her devotion to the cause was legendary. He couldn't imagine her having doubts and tried to emulate her strength. At the same time he envied her for not having childhood memories that alternately tugged him from the Sith path and pushed him deeper.

He had no idea what to say to her now, in quiet moments.

After waiting in empty space near the buoy for more than three hours, something finally happened. The craft that reverted to realspace fifteen hundred kilometers away was small; according to Eli's sensors it was no bigger than a standard escape pod from a mid-sized ship. For it to have travelled through lightspeed meant that its hyperdrive would have taken up a good portion of its interior space. He doubted this thing had room for more than one or two people.

With smooth determination, Darth Talon kicked on the engines and sent them on an intercept course. The craft gradually swelled in the viewport, and indeed it looked like an escape pod, oval-shaped with prominent rear thrusters and only tiny porthole windows. The engines appeared to be dead, with only inertia carrying it through space.

"Ready the tractor beam," Talon said. Those were her first words to him in hours.

Eli did just that. As they soared toward the pod he reached out with the Force and tried to sense life inside. He felt one being, very faintly. Perhaps the life was in danger, or perhaps his own senses were weak.

"Do you have a lock?" asked Talon.

Eli answered by grabbed the pod with their tractor beam. Their pull counteracted the pod's natural acceleration, and once it came to a near-total stop, Eli released the tractor beam so Talon could maneuver their airlock to couple with the pod.

When the two craft were finally attached, Eli and Talon left their seats and went to the airlock. Though the hatch on the pod did not allow them to see inside, their shipboard computer coupled with the pod's and received a status reading: one passenger, breathable atmosphere, temperature within normal range.

Because there was nothing else to do, Talon tapped the controls to open the airlock. The two heavy metal doors peeled back as one, revealing the interior of the pod. It was shaped like a stout tube and padded on all sides. A body was strapped to one wall, crash webbing across its torso. Eli immediately noted that the feet and hands were separately bound.

It was a human male, pale, bearded. He'd never seen the man before. He didn't seem to be Sith.

Talon pushed herself across the pod and Eli followed. They converged on the bound man together. His eyes, once closed, now flittered open as they loomed above him. His jaw creaked open; his lips looked dry from thirst. Eli noticed a slim tube running from the crook of his right arm to a medpack attached to the wall. It had probably provided him with enough hydration to live through several days in hyperspace.

"Who are you?" Darth Talon asked sternly. "Why did Darth Maladi send you?"

The mouth opened wider and so did the eyes. Suddenly the man unleashed a series of hacking coughs. The two Sith backed away. Cringing, Eli wiped spittle from his face and watched the man writhe as much as his bounds would allow.

He understood nothing of this except that the man was dying. "We must help him," he said.

He looked at Talon to find her shocked to stillness. He'd never seen that before, and without her guidance he didn't know what to do. He had no idea what was wrong with the man; perhaps, if he'd been a Jedi healer, he might have known it intuitively, but he was a Sith and there were no Sith healers.

So instead they watched the man hack and cough and wheeze until he gave a death-rattle and went still. Even with that done, neither of them moved.

Eventually Eli reached out and began unbuckling the body from the wall. It was already starting to stiffen. Once it was free he saw the thin needle that had been tucked against the wall, behind his back. There was a little liquid left in the attached syringe.

"The poison must have been set to inject once we opened the pod," Eli surmised. "But why?"

He looked to his master and saw Talon still struggling to reel in her shock. "Perhaps... it is a message. Though I do not know what kind."

"From Maladi?"

"I do not *know*," she growled. "We must take this back to Saijo."

“The body?”

“All of it. We should be able to go through hyperspace with this pod attached.” She tore her eyes off the dead body and told Eli, “This puzzle is beyond us. We’ll take the pieces to Saijo, to Lord Nihl. He will know what to make of it.”

Eli nodded. Even through his surprise he sensed it, and it compounded his shock further. Darth Talon did not really believe what she had said.

In the name of Empress Fel, the Imperial Knights were able to bend the entire police force in Nashal into helping them search for the missing Force-users. They’d put the city in a state of near-lockdown as they went from door to door, asking civilians for any trace of the missing knights.

It was, Shado Vao thought, a mighty show of force, but it wouldn’t amount to much. Whatever agents had taken Kel Yobis and Ganner Krieg had gone to great lengths to hide their activities; uninformed beings-on-the-street would be useless in this. If the kidnappers and their captives were still on Talus this would drive them deeper into hiding, and there was no guarantee they could be uncovered. There was still a Jedi back on Nubia, scouring the scene where Yobis had been taken after what seemed to be a brief struggle; perhaps he would uncover some clue while everyone on Talus grounded their heels into the dirt waiting for a break that could never come.

It was not in Shado’s nature to be pessimistic. He admitted to himself that was uncomfortable seeing so much power in the hands of the Imperial Knights. The Jedi often seemed like junior partners in this new coalition; their ranks had been levelled by Darth Krayt and were still struggling to rebuild. The Imperial Knights, with their higher profiles, were taking in more recruits. Some Jedi quietly fretted that their order would be eclipsed, their ancient knowledge and rituals superseded by those of a young and arrogant offshoot.

Shado understood their feeling, but he did not believe the Jedi were in danger of withering extinction. Their knowledge and rituals had lasted over thirty thousand years and would endure still. Rather, he was afraid of becoming irrelevant to

the course of history, and his gut told him this strange hunt on Talus was a pivot on which history might turn.

He was therefore relieved when Master Solus, Kel Yobis' teacher, hailed him via comlink and reported that she'd sensed her former apprentice in the Force, that his presence was weak but he was somewhere in the city and she was trying to find him.

Right after getting the call Shado considered telling the Nashal police to join up with Solus and search. Then he chastened himself, switched his comlink frequency, and called Azlyn Rae.

A half hour later, a combined swarm of Jedi, Imperials, and local police had converged on an unlikely location: a medical research center attached to the city's main university. Master Solus was their guide, and once the police secured the entrances and exits, the old woman led them through the building's corridors and stairwells, following the taste of Yobis' presence as surely as Azlyn had followed his through Nashal's streets.

Shado, for his part, sensed nothing except the concerned and confused thoughts of students and researchers suddenly trapped in the building. He followed behind Solus with a hand on his lightsaber, tense, always reaching out with the Force for a clearer clue of what lay ahead.

As most of the group crept along in silence, Shado bent close to Azlyn and whispered, "Do you feel anything from Ganner?"

Her scarred face scrunched into a frown. "I... I don't know. I feel... something. It may be him, but he's not reaching back."

Hardly the certainty he was hoping for. "I don't feel any Sith," he offered.

"Neither do I. But if it wasn't Sith behind this, then who?"

Shado shook his head; he had nothing to offer.

Master Solus stopped abruptly before a door. The old woman held out a hand, touching it metal face, sensing deeper inside. The police exchanged confused looks but drew their sidearms.

Softly, Treis Sinde asked, "Is he inside?"

Solus nodded. She moved her hand up and tapped the door's controls. To Shado's surprise, they opened on command.

Shado, Azlyn, and Sinde ignited their lightsabers and went in first. It was a plain room, without windows or other doors. Counters against the walls were lined with scientific instruments Shado couldn't name; a computer terminal took up the far corner. And in the middle of the room, beneath stark overhead lights, were two figures in white jumpsuits, placed in reclining examination chairs: one green-skinned Rodian and one red-haired human. Shado recognized them both immediately.

Azlyn went to Ganner's side. A clear tube ran from the crook of his arm to a hydration device next to the bed. She reached out to touch his face and Shado could feel her probing him with the Force, trying to rouse him to consciousness. Master Solus soon appeared beside Yobis and tried to do the same.

The police moved in and well, though there was nothing in the room to secure. Sinde told the nearest officer, "We'll need full security feeds from every camera in this building. We'll need to know how they got in here, how long they've been here, and who put them in."

As the police got to work, Shado whispered to the Imperial, "I know we should try, but if the kidnappers have been this good at covering their tracks, I doubt they'd slip up now."

"Have they covered their tracks, Master Vao?" Sinde raised a white eyebrow. "We *did* find them."

Shado looked back at the reclining figures. "We were *meant* to find them here."

"Agreed. None of this makes sense."

"Do you still think this was Sith?"

"I... do not know, Master Jedi."

Sinde could have been lying. They were on the same side but Jedi and Imperial Knights kept secrets from each other all the time. In the Force, though, Sinde's confusion seemed honest.

His heart lifted a little when he saw Ganner's eyes flicker open. Shado moved to the opposite side of the bed from Azlyn, who was squeezing Ganner's hand tight.

“Are you awake, Ganner?” she asked. “Can you hear me?”

His jaw hinged open. Despite the intravenous hydration his lips were cracked and dry. He must have been here for over a day, sedated and unconscious.

“Az... Azlyn?” Ganner croaked.

“We have you, Ganner. You’re all right.” She squeezed his hand harder.

Shado touched his shoulder more gently. “Master Krieg, I’m glad to see you’re alive. One of our Jedi was held captive too. Do you remember what happened?”

His face wrinkled in confusion. “I... captive?”

“Ganner,” asked Azlyn, “What’s the last thing you remember? What happened on Belgaroth?”

“Bel... garoth...” His face furrowed as he struggled to gather thoughts. “I remember... landing... looking for Sith...”

“That’s right, you were sent by the empress,” Azlyn nodded. “You were only on the ground for two hours. What happened to you there?”

Ganner was struggling. He shook his head weakly, trying to clear it, then asked, “Where... am I now?”

“You’re in a medical research facility on Talus on the city of Nashal. A Jedi named Kel Yobis is also being held here. Ganner, do you remember what happened on Belgaroth?”

He stared hard at the ceiling until he finally croaked, “No... I remember... Nothing... I can’t remember.”

Shado felt cold in his stomach and looked over his shoulder to where Master Solus was bent over her barely-conscious apprentice. Solus was a highly skilled empath, capable of looking deep into the minds and hearts of others. Shado hoped she might uncover what he could not, but when his eyes met the old woman’s she shook her head in mournful confirmation.

## Chapter Seven

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Socorro was a versatile planet, and the mountain ridges in which *Mynock* was now settled- green conifer forests, dusted white by snow- looked worlds away from the black sand wastes over which *Crimson Axe* perched thousands of kilometers to the south. Nonetheless just being here, knowing Rav was nearby and what was about to happen, unsettled Cade Skywalker in ways he hadn't expected.

Partially it was just nerves. When something was important to him, Cade liked to take control of it with his own hands. Now he was sitting half a world away while Ania Solo and her buddies made the all-important sale to Rav. It was simple enough; with the goods they were selling Rav was sure to buy. He doubted they'd muck it up. Still, he hated depending on someone else.

They'd originally planned to have Chak and Kee fence it. Cade, Jariah, and Deliah had known the Wookiee smuggler and his scrappy little Devaronian fixer for a long time; they were a known quantity and they had a grudge against Rav too. Then these newcomers had bounded into them on Mon Gazza, offering things Chak and Kee couldn't. Galaxy-wide notoriety for one, and Force powers for another. Cade had found it impossible to resist that, even though Jariah and Deliah hadn't been as enthused.

Now, as he sat in *Mynock's* cockpit, waiting for word and watching snow softly fall, he started to wonder whether the Force itself might have had a hand in this. He didn't like the idea; as far as he was concerned he'd done his bit for the



Force and its big Skywalker destiny. He'd paid his dues and wanted to collect some recompense. That Solo and her friends had bounced into *Mynock's* crew just before they were about to make their long-awaited, long-planned move against Rav... He didn't like the coincidence.

One thing Cade had definitely learned about the Force was that even when it prodded you around it never explained itself, and it wasn't going to give him any grand revelations while he sat here waiting for the sale to go down. So he tried to think about something else.

They'd planned this heist to get rich, and equally to get back at Rav. They had every reason to hold a murderous grudge, as far as Cade was concerned. The one-legged, one-eyed Feeroin was as nasty as any pirate to roam through space. Cade and Jariah had seen that first-hand growing up on the *Axe*. Even after they'd finally paid their way free of their debt to him, Rav had kept Cade close, hooking him on death sticks and feeding all his worst habits. Those were bad days, ones Cade didn't like to think about, but it was hard not to with Rav so close. Later on, Rav had sold Deliah and Jariah to the Imps. Later still, he'd sent all three of them into a trap laid by Darth Maladi on Wayland. Before Cade had frazzed her brain, the Sith witch claimed she'd paid Rav a million credits for that. Cade planned to take him for way more.

He didn't know how long he'd been sitting in the cockpit, feet up on the console, watching the snow fall when Deliah came in. She leaned over the back of his pilot's chair and mussed his hair.

"They'll finish when they finish," she said.

"Yeah, I know." He reached up and took her hand. "What's Jariah doing?"

"Going through his weapons. Look at his cabin, you'd think we're about to fight a war."

"We're done with that."

"We'd better be."

"We are. Once we score this, *mesh'la*, we won't be under nobody's heel ever again."

"Rav could still come after us. Hire bounty hunters."

“Yeah, with whose money? Besides, Rav won’t even know we’re the ones that robbed him. He thinks we’re dead, just like everybody else.”

Deliah laughed lightly. He loved that sound. “Cade, I *know* you. You’re not gonna let this go without rubbing Rav’s nose in it.”

“Rav doesn’t have a nose.”

“You know what I mean. Stang, I don’t blame you. I want the *murglack* to know it too. Losing his nest egg is better than he deserves.”

Her voice went dark and cold, normally unlike her. She’d nearly been killed on Wayland, torn apart in agony by Maladi’s bioweapon and Vong monstrosities. They said Zeltrons were supposed to be carefree, easygoing, and ever-forgiving of other people’s flaws. The Force knew the last part was true of Deliah; she’d have left Cade years ago otherwise. When stirred to anger, though, she could be as nasty as any dark Jedi.

Cade held up a finger. “That’s where you’re wrong, though. This is exactly what he deserves. Killing him? That’d be too easy. Living the rest of his life poor and humiliated’s a *much* better fate.”

Deliah hummed thoughtfully. “You do know how to take revenge.”

Cade grunted. He knew what revenge really felt like; the way all your piled hurt kindled to a fire inside you that wouldn’t be sated until you’d enacted burning pain on everyone around you, even the ones who’d never done you harm. He’d walked close to the Force’s dark side plenty of times, closer than he’d admitted to himself then. He knew what it was like to balance on the razor’s edge and he knew what it was like to tip so far toward the dark you thought you might fall forever.

He wouldn’t fall this time. Even if he saw Rav and looked him in the eye before this was all over, he wouldn’t give in to that burning anger. He’d mastered that, beaten the darkness in himself as surely as he’d beaten the Sith.

That was what he told himself. Maybe that wasn’t entirely true, and maybe that was why he felt weird and extra-edgy as

he sat waiting for something to happen. He'd find out one way or the other, when the time finally came.

"This ain't revenge," he muttered. "This is just getting what we're due."

"Sure." After a pause she asked, "If me and Jariah want revenge, you're not gonna stop us, are you?"

"Why would I? Sure, take a little revenge for me. Long as I got you, I don't got nothing to worry about." Cade squeezed Deliah's hand.

"Romantic." He heard her smirk, felt her bend forward and kiss his forehead. Then she withdrew her hand and went back out of the cockpit, leaving him alone with the quiet consoles and the falling snow. Watching and waiting.

Work aboard *Crimson Axe* wasn't so bad, as long as she could avoid other people. The first day Kyra showed up for maintenance work, Rav explained that he'd been having problems with the air filtration units scattered throughout his ship. There were also a few power relay junctions which had failed months ago and needed replacement, which meant Rav gave Kyra access to most parts of the ship, including the barely-used storage rooms, dark corridors and maintenance shafts that made her feel far away from criminal nests like the Golden Gorg.

Though the *Axe* had been parked on Socorro for nearly a decade it was still very much a spaceship, designed to be a sealed and vacuum-proof environment. Some past technician had refitted its climate control system with an oxygen intake but no new circulators, which meant that air sucked in from outside wasn't getting properly distributed throughout the *Axe*. Rav gave her permission to install some circulators into the air conduits, which gave her an excuse to secrete herself in more out-of-the-way parts of the ship. He paid her by the hour too and grudgingly Kyra began to admit that this gig wasn't so bad.

She thought that, sometimes, until she rolled up her sleeve and looked at the fresh Bloody Bones cross-mark on her bicep. It was a bitter reminder that there was no easy escape from this life.

She still had work to do back at the Chopyard, and after spending all morning working in the *Axe* it was almost time to get back. She was almost done installing another air circulator in one of the storage rooms, standing atop three piled crates to work on the vent tucked against the ceiling. She'd brought Sleepy, partially as a helper and partially because she was less likely to be bothered when lugging a partially-dismembered protocol droid on her back.

Standing on her toes, she used both hands to place the ventilation filter over the mouth of the vent. Once it looked in place she said, "Micro-welder."

"Yes... tress."

A gold-metal arm waved over the right side of her head, holding the requested tool. Holding the filter over the vent with one hand, she grabbed the tool with the other and carefully began to work. When she'd welded all four sides shut she handed the micro-welder back to Sleepy, then turned around so the droid could get a good look at her work.

"Everything sealed?"

"Yes... tress."

"No mico-fractures?"

She waited a moment for the droid to use his enhanced photo-receptors. "No... tress."

"Good. Thanks, Sleepy."

"Always... easure... tress."

With that finally done, Kyra climbed unsteadily off the crates. She gathered the last of her tools, added to the load on her back, and began making her way through the ship. She still had to make it through the Gorg, but if she moved fast and determined hopefully no one would bother her.

As she got close to the cantina she got an inexplicable feeling that something unusual was happening. Sure enough, when she actually got there the place was jam-packed, more than she'd ever seen it, and instead of being noisy with revelry, semi-hushed murmurs ran through the crowd, as though in anticipation. She tried to shoulder her way through, catching snippets of conversation as she went.

"You really think it's them?"

"I saw their ship coming in to land, it sure as kark looked like the one from the news holos..."

“Why they coming here? Why they want see Rav?”

“We find out in a minute, hey?”

Frankly Kyra didn’t care what new low-life was visiting Rav. She just wanted to get out of here and open up the Chopyard, because she certainly had work to do there. She attempted to wedge her way between a pair of tall Brubbs, only for one of them to reach out and grab Sleepy’s golden head with its claws.

Kyra tried to shirk herself free, but the Brubb said, “Where you going so fast, human girl?”

“I need to get to work.” She added, “I work for *Rav*.”

“We work Rav once too.” The other Brubb made a green fist and pounded the Bloody Bones on his bicep. “Work bounty hunting now, but Rav, good stopping place. Good parties, hey?”

“Right.” She jerked again, pulling Sleepy free, but the second Brubb moved directly in front of her.

“What work you do for Rav, human girl? You look better without clunky droid.”

This was exactly what she’d been wanting to avoid. With a low growl she insisted, “I’m a mechanic. From the Chopyard, down in Axetown.”

“I been that place,” said the first Brubb. “You work Rugo?”

“Rugo’s dead.”

“Well, big shame, hey? But it happens. Say you put down that droid now have a drink with us, human girl.”

“I need to *go*,” she insisted, but as she sidestepped the second Brubb she heard the murmurs rise to a chatter, felt attention turn toward the Gorg’s entrance.

“We have drink later,” growled the voice behind her. “Now it showtime.”

According to Skywalker, being allowed to dock their ship at one of the landing pads jutting out from atop *Crimson Axe*’s towering hull was something generally reserved for Rav’s honored guests. That meant that calling the *Axe* ahead of their arrival, announcing their identities and intention to sell some extremely rare loot, had certainly grabbed Rav’s attention, but Ania didn’t exactly like the precedent. If she

wanted to be powerful or famous she'd have taken Empress Fel up on her job offer a year ago.

They were met at the landing pad by one of Rav's lieutenants, a truly unpleasant-looking Devaronian with one cracked horn and rotten teeth. He tried not to show it, but Ania could tell he was a little intimidated by the two-and-a-half-meter-tall assassin droid that led the party. Good, Ania thought. Given the kind of cargo they had packed into two crates, some beings could get violently greedy.

Skywalker had insisted they make a point of being who they were, and they'd obliged. Jao had put on his white armor and left his lightsaber dangling at his belt, very visible. Ania had thrown a slip of plasteel armor underneath her usual monochrome jacket and stuffed a blaster at either hip. Sauk did his best not to look nervous and AG-37 was simply AG-37. They looked ready to get some tough business done; Ania *felt* ready.

The one-horned Devaronian led them down a long lift ride, through several dank hallways, and finally ushered them into their destination. They'd been warned that Rav liked to do business in public, often in a raucous casino and gambling den called the Golden Gorg, but she hadn't expected to walk into a place jam-packed and overheating with dozens of bodies. Countless eyes turned on them; murmurs rippled through the crowd.

"It appears our reputation has preceded us," said AG-37.

All eyes were on the four of them as they walked across the Gorg's scant open space to a broad booth. The one-eyed, one-legged, cruelly grinning Feeorin lounging in the center was obviously Rav.

"Welcome, *pateesas*, to the *Crimson Axe*," Rav said without getting up from the booth. "As you can see, you've got my patrons here all riled up. Not every day they get to see galactic saviors."

"We didn't mean to cause a stir," Ania said. It had been agreed that she'd take front for the negotiations; she stood a step in front of AG-37, so the tall assassin droid loomed intimidating at her back. Sauk and Jao stood on either side of the two crates. "We were just looking to offload some cargo. We were told you were the old pirate to see."

“On the comm you said this is cargo you can’t unload anywhere else.” Rav adopted a perfectly-audible stage whisper. “*Sith* contraband, you said.”

That roused more murmurs from the crowd; curious, appreciative. Rav seemed to be something of a showman. Ania scanned the assembled beings, trying to guess who were just bar-patrons and who were Rav’s muscle. She saw more than a few with the Bloody Bones marks on them; a couple of Rodians, a female Twi’lek and Togruta making a svelte pair, two green Brubbs. Her gaze halted on a human between them, a teenage girl by the look of her, with brown hair, a Bloody Bones mark on her bare right bicep, and the head of a battered gold protocol droid sticking up over her shoulder, like it was strapped to her back. From her expression, the girl did not look happy to be here.

The girl’s scowl, the old droid, the crowd full of *sleemos*, Rav’s predatory grin. They all stirred things in Ania, memories she normally did a good job at repressing. Easy money suddenly felt more serious. Ania turned all her attention to the Feeorin pirate and said, “That’s right. Sith goods, from the basement of their old temple on Coruscant.”

Rav made a thoughtful scowl. “That so? I understood the triumvirate put that place on ultra-lockdown once they took power. Figured they’d have scooped up all the Sith valuables and locked ‘em away so prying minds couldn’t find their nasty secrets.”

“They missed some.”

“And you didn’t?”

They’d plotted their cover story out in advance. Ania looked over her shoulder and nodded at Jao. “My friend here used to be an Imperial Knight. He worked on the teams that surveyed the Sith temple. He found things, little nooks he didn’t tell the empress about. He led us to the goods.”

“And when was this?”

She pretended to think. “Oh... it must’ve been... the day after we all got commendations from the empress for helping destroy the Sith.”

Rav stared at her, one eye squinting, skeptical. Then he brayed laughter. A lot of his audience followed his cue. When it died down the pirate said, “That’s bold. I do like it. I

suppose you were all planning your little scheme while the empress was pinning gold on your chests.”

“She had a little difficulty with A-gee.” Ania rapped the droid’s metal torso. “But pretty much.”

“Well, that’s interesting,” said Rav. “And you sat on the goods, why?”

“Wait for things to cool down. For people to forget about us, which hasn’t gone quite as well as we’d hoped... But we’re ready to cash in on our prize.”

“Uh-huh. And who told you to come to me?”

They’d anticipated this too. Skywalker had offered the names of some fringers still on good terms with Rav, but if the pirate actually checked their references it would screw up negotiations.

Instead AG-37 said, “I have been operating for more decades than you, Master Rav, have been alive, and my memory capacity is, put bluntly, far superior to any organic’s. I merely searched my databases and determined that you to individual best suited to buying our merchandise for the sake of black-market resale. If my calculations were in error, please let us know and we will seek out a new client.”

Rav waved a hand. “No need for that, my metal friend. Assuming you’re not trying to pull a fast one on me. Let’s see the goods.”

Jaο and Sauk took the top crate by the handles and walked it forward. They set it down midway between Ania and Rav and pulled open the lid. The crowd edged closer for a better look. Rav finally pushed off the booth and stepped forward, three-toed metal foot clanking on the deck.

“Frankly,” Ania said, “I’m not archaeologist so I can’t tell you what it all is, but you’ll find a number of authentic art objects, some bound volumes, and a collection of lanvaroks.”

Rav reached into the crate and began to examine the contents. He looked over several grotesque sculptures carved from black stone, traced through by blood-red veins. He took out to of the lanvaroks and examined the bladed weapons. Her pulse quickened as he looked over the one with R2-D2’s tracer beacon and calmed when he put it back in the crate.

“It *looks* authentic,” Rav said skeptically.

“It is.”



He closed the crate's lid. "Let me see the other one."

Jao and Sauk placed the second on top of the first and opened it. Sauk stepped back but Jao reached in and removed the case containing the three holocrons.

"If you want proof of authenticity," Jao said with a hand on the box, "You won't get much more than this."

Rav opened it and looked over the holocrons closely without touching. Finally, he picked up the center one, held the device up to the light, and examined it again. In a lower voice he asked, "Where's the proof?"

"You know what that is, don't you?" asked Jao.

"Course I know what a Sith holocron looks like. What I've got in my hand is a little black pyramid."

"Holocrons only react to the presence of Force-users. You know that, don't you?"

"I've been told."

"It's the truth. And I can prove it."

He held out his hand, palm-up. Rav considered, then placed the holocron in his grip. Ania knew the revulsion Jao felt at the thing but he kept his face blank as ethereal light emerged from the pyramid's edges, converged above its tip, and took the form of the hooded Sith woman Ania had seen before.

"My name is Darth Traya," it said. "For what purpose do you seek my knowledge?"

Jao looked through her holo-image to Rav. "Authentic enough for you?"

Ania could see the hunger in the Feeorin's eye. He was sold, but wanted to make a show of stubbornness. "Keep talking to it."

Jao just barely restrained and scowl. He told the holocron, "I see the wisdom of the Sith. I want to learn the dark side of the Force."

"Who are you to summon me? Are you a Jedi?"

"I'm no Jedi. I once served an empire." His eyes flicked up to Rav's. "Now I just want power."

"Power I can give you," Darth Traya's ghostly image said, "But tell me first. What will you give up for such power? What lengths have you already gone to achieve it? A true Sith must have a keen desire, and no limits."

"Sounds like my kind of *cheeka*," Rav grinned. "Let me have it."

With no reluctance at all, Jao handed the thing to Rav. He stepped back and Darth Traya's image dissolved to nothing. The holocron was dark and still as it had been a minute ago.

"As I told you," said Jao, "It only responds to Force-users."

"I understand." Rav placed the holocron in the case between the other two and closed the lid. "This all sit good with you, Imp Jedi? Thought a *bukee* like you'd have some moral objection to getting rich off Sith merchandise."

"I'm no Jedi and no Imperial Knight."

"You been taking lessons from that *cheeka* in the holocron?"

"No desire to be Sith either." Jao crossed his arms over his chest. "They have a habit of ending up dead."

Rav grunted, amused. Loud enough for his audience to hear, he said, "All right, let's talk price."

The fact that they weren't moving this talk to a private location meant Rav still thought he could drive a hard bargain. Ania was almost tempted to let him, but if the rest of Skywalker's plan went had this was all the profit she'd get from this mission.

So she bargained. The next fifteen minutes was a series of proposals and counterproposals. The audience hung on their every word as Ania and Rav exchanged smiles, glares, bluffs, and money offers. She felt like she was facing a master sabacc player without the sabacc to get in the way. In a weird way it was thrilling, and when she finally worked Rav up to an offer than she and her crew had agreed would be acceptable, she took the risk and forced him to raise his offer just a little more. Then she accepted.

The deal was made, the show over. Rav's coterie slowly began to turn back to their drinks. Jao, Sauk, and AG-37 stood guard around the crates while the buyer finalized payment. As she waited for the Devaronian lieutenant to prepare the money, Ania caught a flash of gold as the girl with half a protocol droid on her back tore determinedly through the slightly-thinned crowd and exited the cantina.

Finally, the Devaronian returned to Rav's side. Ania had been half-expecting him to bring some of those auridium

ingots or nova crystals Skywalker had mentioned, but instead he had a simple data-chip with access to a private account. Feeling uncomfortably reminded of the mess on Mon Gazza, Ania took a datapad from AG-37, plugged in the chip, and waited with held breath until she got confirmation of credits transferred to the droid's private account.

With a relieved smile Ania said, "Pleasure doing business with you, Rav."

"Pleasure's mine." Rav sunk back onto the sofa. With a snap of his fingers, four Rodians appeared to carry away the merchandise. They took it out a back door, Ania noticed, perhaps deeper into the ship.

"If you're in the mood to spend some of your newfound riches, I've got plenty of places to do so," Rav said. "Cantinas, casinos, pleasure houses, all the amenities you want can be found in *Crimson Axe* and Axetown."

"I'll keep that pitch in mind," Ania said, "But for now, my friends and I are heading back to our ship."

After selling to Rav they flew straight up through the atmosphere as though they were burning for orbit, then allowed themselves to fall back in, all the way down to the mountain ranges in the snowy northern mountains where their partners in crime were already set down. Once they'd landed *Free Agent* in a nearby valley, they trekked up to join *Mynock's* crew in planning their next move.

Jaó admitted that, so far, things had gone pretty well, but as Skywalker had said from the get-go, selling to Rav was the easy part. Breaking into his storehouse, and most importantly destroying those Sith artifacts, was the hard part.

He was, therefore, not entirely surprised when their arrival and declaration of success was met with mildly downcast looks from Skywalker and his compatriots. As they gathered in *Mynock's* hold Skywalker's droid wheeled into the center of the deck and projected a holo-map showing *Crimson Axe*, the butte it perched on, and a portion of the surrounding wastes.

"We've been reading the beacon loud and clear, so we don't think Rav's people found it," Skywalker explained. "Put it on the map, Artoo."

The droid gave a toot of agreement, and a pulsing yellow light appeared on the blue-shaded map. So far as Jao could tell, it was located directly aboard *Crimson Axe*.

"So Rav still has it on his ship," said Ania. "Not surprising. We've only been gone a couple of hours, and it looked like he was hauling it deeper inside when we left."

"Wish it could be that simple," said Jariah. "Artoo, go topographic mode."

The top-down map shifted. The holo gained realistic, to-scale depth and it zoomed close on *Axe* and the butte. The yellow light still pulsed, but not it seemed to be located inside the rock formation itself, well below the body of the parked pirate ship.

"I don't understand," Jao muttered.

"Like I told you before, Rav set the *Axe* down inside an old sarlacc pit," Skywalker explained.

Sauk nodded. "So the storehouse *is* the sarlacc pit."

Skywalker crossed his arms and nodded. "Almost *too* obvious, don't'cha think? That's definitely what our readings say. They *could* be wrong..."

"But it makes sense," Ania agreed. "It would be super-secure and easy to keep an eye on."

"We should still wait a day or two and see if the beacon moves," said AG-37.

"Agreed," said Deliah, "But we should also start planning. If Rav keeps his bullion beneath *Crimson Axe*, we're probably going to have to go through the ship to get there. That or drill through half a mountain."

"Yeah, I'm sure we can do that real sneaky. Rav'd never notice," groused Jariah.

Skywalker looked equally grim. "I was hoping not to have to set foot on that karking ship again. But I guess we ain't that lucky."

"You know your way around?" asked Ania.

Skywalker snorted. "Me and Jariah *lived* on the *Axe* for years. I'm sure Rav's done some remodeling, but not that much." His eyes narrowed as he recalled old times and old haunts. "Might know how to get through the bottom of that thing... But I might not. Certainly can't expect to scope it out myself without drawing Rav's attention."

"Well," Ania said, "He *did* suggest we hang around for entertainment."

"And then we took off," Jao added.

"For the kind of credits we can throw around at his gambling tables, I bet he'd welcome us back."

"He'd be sure to keep an eye on us," Sauk added.

"That's something we'd just have to deal with." Ania looked hard at Skywalker. "If you want us to keep doing your work for you, we'll need more than just a quarter of Rav's loot."

Skywalker snorted. "You already made your deal."

"That was before we knew what we were really getting into. If we have to go *through* Rav's ship just to get to his nest egg, this job gets a lot more dangerous. One-quarter of an unknown amount just isn't going to cut it."

"It's what we agreed." Anger flared in his eyes. Jao had heard bad things about Cade Skywalker getting angry. "You get to keep everything from the sale today. I'd say we're already being *grancha* generous."

"You'd never have agreed to that if you didn't think Rav's storehouse contained way, way more." Ania smiled tightly, daringly. "We're not going to risk our lives unless we've got guarantee of a better reward. Otherwise, we'll just get back on our ship and fly away with what we've got."

They glared at each other from across R2-D2's dome. Despite their hard looks, Jao didn't sense real rage from either. Leaving those Sith holocrons in Rav's hands wasn't something Jao would allow; he was sure he'd made that clear to Ania. This was a bluff, holding out for more payment. It was a very Ania thing too, gambling hard on a spur of the moment.

At least, he thought that was what she was doing. Ania was Ania, and even after all this time he couldn't always guess her intentions. And, much to his chagrin, he knew he couldn't reign in her impulses.

Now that he thought about it, Jao started to get worried.

"You don't like a quarter of Rav's stash? Fine," Skywalker said. "Take a third."

Ania shook her head. "I want an even split of the score, seven ways."

“No karking way. We’re not going that high.”

“We can split today’s money seven ways too.”

Skywalker got thoughtful and looked to compatriots. Jariah shook his head. Deliah bit her lip and said nothing.

“How about this?” said Skywalker. “Split the big bounty in half. Fifty percent with my crew, fifty percent with yours. Should still give each of you a big payday.”

“And today’s money?”

“Same way.” Cade jabbed a thumb at his chest. “You give half of it to us right now. We’ve got a credit account all lined up.”

“We’re not giving up half of a sure thing,” Ania said. “For all we know Rav’s fancy storehouse could have nothing but cobwebs inside.”

“Then what do you want, *cheeka*? You gonna threaten to walk again?”

“I could. Then I’d keep a hundred percent of today’s profits.”

Skywalker glared at her again. Ania really sounded like she’d do it. Jao couldn’t hid his anxiety now; he looked back and forth between Sauk and AG-37, waiting for either to interject, but neither did.

Finally Skywalker exhaled. “We get one-third of today’s score. Tomorrow’s, our teams split fifty-fifty.”

Ania seemed to consider; Jao had no idea which way she’d go. Finally she smiled, extended a hand into R2-D2’s blazing holo-field, and said, “Pleasure doing business with you, Skywalker.”

He grunted, scowled, and took her hand. As they shook Ania glanced sideways at Jao. She gave him a tight smile, and a wink, and he knew she’d been bluffing all along. Bluffing, and counting on Jao’s confusion to help sell the bluff. It had been spontaneous, risky, somewhat callous, but crazy enough to work.

It had, in other words, been Ania through and through.

Skywalker caught the wink and its meaning. He said, “*Cheeka*, I think I might like you after all.”

## Chapter Eight

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The medical ward of the new government palace on Coruscant undoubtedly offered the best services in the galaxy. The facility not only housed the most up-to-date and advanced equipment and doctors trained in the biology of over four hundred sentient species, it was enhanced by the expertise of the best Force-powered healers in both the Imperial Knights and the Jedi Order.

Nothing save death should have been beyond their ability to cure, but all the doctors and healers couldn't do a thing to mend the broken memories of Ganner Krieg and Kel Yobis.

They continued to try, and for that reason Ganner and Yobis had been told by their respective orders to stay inside the medical ward until further notice. Azlyn made a point of visiting him daily, which wasn't an especially hard task; she had little else to do as Jedi and Knights more senior than her tried to puzzle out what had happened on Talus.

Ganner was puzzled too, and she felt frustrated having so little to tell him. Physically he was fine, and his movements were tight with restless energy as he and Azlyn walked up and down one of glassy walkways that connected the medical ward to other sections of the palace complex. The gleam and bustle of Galactic City at midday surrounded them but felt very distant. The answer to their problem would not be found there.

"I heard the Jedi investigating on Nubia returned this morning," she told Ganner. "I don't know what they found. Neither does Shado, and I asked. I think they took it straight to the Jedi Council."

"Well, I hope the Jedi share it with us."

"They should. The triumvirate is meeting today. I'm sure they'll talk about this."

"They should have been talking about this *before* today."

There was an angry edge to his voice, uncharacteristic for Ganner. Azlyn asked, "What do you mean?"

He stopped pacing and looked out the window. "Did you know Rant Yor?"

It took Azlyn a second to conjure the image of a young Imperial Knight with short gold hair and dark skin. "Vaguely. What do you mean, *did* I know him? I thought he was on a long-term assignment in the Braxant sector."

Ganner sighed. "Most of the Knights haven't been told, but we're pretty sure he disappeared six months ago. Possibly kidnapping."

She blinked. "I didn't know that."

"There was another Knight who went missing almost a year before that. Kovich Handar."

"I thought he was killed in a shuttle accident."

"We found the shuttle but couldn't identify his body. They thought it was... suspicious."

By *they*, Azlyn gathered he meant Draco and the empress. She didn't begrudge Ganner his friends in high places. It clearly did nothing for his peace of mind.

"Do you think it's all connected?"

"How *can* I know?" Anger came back to him, and restlessness. "Azlyn, I don't even know what happened on Belgaroth. I can barely remember getting off my ship. Even that feels like... a dream I can't see clearly. And Kel Yobis is the same. He doesn't even remember being jumped in an alley on Nubia, and the Jedi seems pretty sure *that* happened..."

"The Belgaroth police didn't turn up anything about you," Azlyn said softly. "But they didn't come off as ace investigators to me."

"That doesn't matter." Ganner raised a hand to his forehead. "It's all a blank to me, Azlyn. Someone erased our memories. They had to have used the Force to do it so thoroughly."

"The Jedi healers say they can't find proof your mind was altered that way."



He shook his head and scowled. "It had to be Sith. Besides, a human brain and a Rodian's have barely anything in common, but our memories were excised the exact same way. That sounds like something a Sith could do better than some droid."

"Do you really think it was Sith?"

"I don't know. I don't know anything." His hands balled to fists. "I'm terrified it was, Azlyn. If they could wipe my memory as blank as this... What else could they do? They could have implanted some kind of Force-command inside me, something they could trigger at any time... Until someone figures out what happened I'm a danger. I could kill the empress and not even know I was doing it."

He shook his head, and stared out at the skyline again. The thought hadn't occurred to Azlyn, but she saw now it should have. There was still enough Jedi in her that she balked to consider all possible evils. The empress had so far avoided coming down to the medical ward to see Ganner personally. More notably his friend Draco had also refrained, which meant they were taking Sith brainwashing as a real threat.

After Had Abbadon, Azlyn had spent months learning to use the new body Nat Skywalker and Hogrum Chalk had made for her. Ganner had been there for her during that painful time, and gradually she'd made progress physically and mentally. She'd be there for Ganner now, as best she could, but he was stuck in a way she was not, trapped with a mind he could no longer trust.

She couldn't give him the help he needed. She could barely give anything at all, but still, she could give it. As the both looked at the gleaming towers she reached down and found his hand with hers. She squeezed it lightly, and he squeezed it back, and they stayed like that for a while. It was all either of them could do.

The triumvirate's secure conference room at the heart of the palace had seen many tense conversations, but this time it was different. In those cases their arguments had been with one another, and while there were plenty of grievances parties could throw at each other now, it was clear the real threat lay outside them all.

After receiving a short summary of the events on Nubia, Belgaroth, and Talus, Admiral Stazi folded green hands on the conference table and said, "I must know. Should we act on the assumption this is a Sith plot against both your orders?"

Neither Marasiah nor K'Kruhk responded immediately. After the Battle of the Floating World Marasiah had allowed herself to indulge in the hope the Sith might be gone forever, all the while knowing how futile it was. They'd dealt irreparable harm to her family already: corrupting her father, killing her mother, setting her grandfather up for assassination. A part of her *wanted* this threat to be Sith; at least then she'd have a clear image of her enemy and could face it with a righteous heart.

K'Kruhk sighed and said, "I believe that would be premature."

"But you *do* believe that a Force-user is behind this?" Again they were slow to reply. Stazi reminded them, "This may escalate into a military situation. A large part of our fleet- the Alliance *and* Imperial vessels- are standing down from combat readiness. Ships are being repaired, crews are on extended leave, and the gods know they've earned it. What I need to know now is, should I begin recalling personnel?"

"I don't see cause for you to panic," Marasiah said. "If our enemy had some vast hidden fleet ready for conquest, I doubt they'd resort to this.... subterfuge." She had no other term for what had happened.

Stazi considered that, then asked, "Have *you* panicked?"

Marasiah snorted. "Do I seem panicked?"

"You seem deeply concerned. Both of you." The Duros' eyes shifted to K'Kruhk. "I won't pretend to know what either of you are going through, but if you request something from my fleet, you'll have it. We're a coalition government. An attack on one is an attack on all. And this *was* an attack."

"From an unknown source, using unknown methods," Marasiah said bitterly.

The room dropped into silence, more reflective than tense. After a minute K'Kruhk said, "Empress, was Ganner Krieg the first of your Knights to go missing for unknown causes?"

She searched his long tusked face, searched him in the Force, and read nothing. "Why do you ask?"

"Empress, if our people trusted one another more, if we shared our burdens... perhaps this would have never happened."

"Does the grand master have burdens to share with us?" asked Stazi.

K'Kruhk sighed. "Kel Yobis was not the first Jedi we have lost track of. He is the fourth over the last two years."

Stazi stiffened. He looked at Marasiah and read something she'd failed to hide. "Empress," the admiral asked, "Have your Knights also gone missing?"

She thought of Rant Yor, then Kovis Handar. "We had no idea there was a pattern emerging. We have... misplaced two Knights besides Master Krieg. They went missing on opposite sides of the galaxy. We had no reason to think things *were* connected."

"Which planets?" asked K'Kruhk.

Instinct urged her to hold secrets back, even now, but K'Kruhk was right. It was time to come clear. "Lokondo, in the Braxant sector. Somov Rit, Onatos sector."

They were minor worlds on the edges of the galaxy. K'Kruhk thoughtfully said, "Corbett. Sarka. Raltiir. Gania, in the Tapani sector."

Stazi sighed. "Whoever our enemy is, his reach extends to every corner of the galaxy."

"His reach," K'Kruhk said, "Or his allies."

He said it knowingly. Marasiah asked, "Do you have any idea who those allies are?"

"I may." K'Kruhk placed his hands on the table, long claws facing up. In one furred palm was a datacard. "Our Jedi investigator obtained this on Nubia. The kidnappers have been very adept at scrambling security feeds to cover their tracks, but Kel Yobis was taken from the middle of a dense, industrialized city, very unlike Belgaroth or the other places our people have been kidnapped from. Even the best mercenaries don't get every sensor and holo-cam."

"Mercenaries?" asked Stazi.

K'Kruhk leaned forward and slid the datacard into the reader slot at the center of the table. A moment later a

flattened holo-image began to play. Marasiah shifted in her seat to get a better view. It was an exterior shot of a blunt-faced storage building, seen from across the street of a dense, high-rise urban area. A Rodian, face half-hidden by hooded cloak, moved toward the building, slipped up to the door, carefully cracked it open with the Force, and stepped inside.

"What drew Jedi Yobis to that place?" asked Marasiah.

K'Kruhk shrugged. "Perhaps he was lured. Master Lenar showed him this recording an hour ago, and he did not remember."

Yobis slipped through the door and out of view. Marasiah could see part of the warehouse interior though its glassy upper-level windows. For a long moment the whole image seemed to freeze; then she caught the flashing light of laserfire, and the swirl of a lightsaber.

K'Kruhk reached out and paused the recording. Marasiah and Stazi both leaned forward to squint at the sight seen through the window. Yobis had his back to them, and his saber lifted in a high, horizontal defensive posture. Its glow reflected off the helmet of his attacker, and its T-shaped forward visor could clearly be seen.

"Mandalorians," Stazi said bitterly.

"Can we be certain just from this?" Marasiah asked.

"That was our starting lead," K'Kruhk said. He let the recording play out, and Marasiah caught a few brief flashes of more T-visor helmets before it ended. The Whiphid added, "Our investigator extracted records from the local spaceport and examined ship registries. One ship, which arrived shortly before Kel Yobis and took off shortly after this recording was made, was of a new MandalMotors design."

"Mandalorian warships are popular with criminals and fringers across the galaxy," Stazi reminded.

"Yes, but those are usually acquired via resale. This was a *new* model."

"Mandalorians," Stazi said again, and shook his head.

Marasiah understood his frustration. At the start of the Sith-Imperial war, the Alliance had hired Mandalorian mercenaries to defend key worlds. In the middle of one such mission the reigning Mandalore had been killed and his lieutenant, Yaga Auchs, had seized command. On Auchs'

order the Mandalorians had withdrawn mid-battle, allowing Botajef to fall to the Empire. Since then they'd been sitting tight in their home sector, avoiding the galaxy's larger wars.

It went deeper than that. Marasiah had learned that from her father. Imperial Moff Nyna Calixte claimed to have bought Auch's service in that battle, but Roan Fel had always suspected a Sith hand at work. It was certain that Auch's deceased uncle, another Mandalore, had worked with the One Sith a half-century ago.

"This should be taken very seriously," Marasiah said. "However... Imperial access to Mandalore is quite limited, regardless of what you may have heard."

Stazi looked a little reluctant to believe that; she recalled that he'd been in the battle Yaga Auch had abruptly fled from. To her surprise the Duros said, "I believe... I may know an option. It may come to nothing, so you'll forgive me for not elaborating. I'll look into it as soon as this meeting is over."

He looked between Marasiah and K'Kruhk, asking either if they wanted to challenge him. Marasiah had none to give. Stazi didn't fully trust her; she didn't fully trust him. None in the triumvirate fully trusted each other but two years on and they were still here, because the galaxy needed some kind of stability. All three of them shared that sense of duty, at least.

"Please do," Marasiah nodded. "As you've said, we're all in this together."

And perhaps, she thought, they could even come to trust each other. They might have to in order to face what lay ahead.

There was a mystery behind the dead man they'd carried back from Mustafar, but it was not for Eli to puzzle out. He understood that; he was only an apprentice, and whatever was happening it was far larger than him. Nonetheless it was frustrating to have to wait, and on his return to Saijo he tried to channel that frustration to better ends.

When training their padawans, one test the Jedi had put them through was to blindfold them, then make them face an airborne remote that constantly moved around them and fired low-intensity laser blasts. The goal was to rely on the Force

alone to anticipate the remote and to block its attacks with the lightsaber. Eli had always been good at it.

The Sith, naturally, had a fiercer take on the exercise. Instead of one remote they used three, four, even a half-dozen. Their blasts could vary, ranging from a sharp sting to a near-lethal intensity. To come through such a trial undamaged demanded greater skill than Jedi ever asked of their padawans. Eli bore small scars across his body from past tests, but he was eager to try it again.

The underground bunkers in which the Sith hid on Saijo contained a number of open rooms, walled in on all sides by bleak ferrocrete. Eli took five remotes with him to a room he knew would be available. Dressed only in a loose black tunic he placed the remotes on the cold floor at equidistant positions, tied a blindfold around his eyes, and sat down in the center of them.

He took deep breaths to prepare himself before commencing. His father had taught him to search for inner peace before facing his trials, because the Jedi believed it was in through peace that the Force's cosmic power emerged. For a long time he'd believed it, even after his father's selfless and pointless death. When the Jedi had been chased from their academy on Ossus he'd still clung to the old ways, the belief in peace. During those first few years after the purge he and his fellow apprentices had practiced in hiding on remote planets, taking instruction from Master K'Kruhk himself, gentle and giant and ancient.

He'd learned, too, from a more unlikely teacher: the Yuuzhan Vong warrior Khat Lah, who had been able to open himself to the Force in ways no other member of his race had for eons. Khat Lah's discovery of the Force beggared the Jedi's conception of it, and he'd constantly sought to expand his understanding and his talents. At the same time the Yuuzhan Vong had watched over Eli, acting both from affection and the sense of a debt he'd owed Eli's father. Eli had admired Khat Lah and been fascinated by him, until the day the Yuuzhan Vong had bid farewell and set off to explore the Force on his own.

Eli didn't know what had happened the Khat Lah. He wondered what greater powers the Yuuzhan Vong had

unlocked in his wanderings, what he was capable of now. Surely he'd have advanced beyond the limits of Jedi teaching. Eli was still trying to do that, in his own way. Sitting on the hard floor, surrounded the waiting weapons, he focused on that desire, the aching hunger, that vital need to become more than a Jedi. More than his father who had failed.

Finally, when he felt ready, Eli rose to his feet, ignited his lightsaber, and said, "Begin."

He barely heard the five remotes lift off the floor. With desire and will he called the Force to him, felt the currents of motion around him and sensed the five remotes as they rotated. When the first one fired he was ready, catching the laser on his blade. Another shot came from the opposite angle and he pivoted to bat it away. Then came another shot, low at his feet, and he jumped to avoid it.

The fight was fully joined now. In the large chamber he had enough room to maneuver; he jumped and ducked and spun out and his lightsaber never stopped moving as the remotes picked up the frequency of their attacks. He had to jump and deflect at the same time, rarely with both feet on the ground, and soon he was panting and damp with sweat. All the while he focused on the Force and the movement around him, never losing tracks of the five remotes even as his energy began to wane.

His movements were slowing, too much. One remote landed a shot on his right calf, stinging muscle. Another hit his right shoulder. He was lucky; the remotes were programmed to fire at random intensity, and neither of those shots had been too strong. He took the pain, turned it to anger, and turned anger into power. Instead of just sensing the remotes in the Force he grabbed two, arresting their rotations, then flung them hard against the closest wall. The other three remotes maneuvered around him, still firing, but in his anger he knew exactly where their strikes would land and he evaded them all. He struck out in a one-handed slash, cutting one remote neatly in two, then grabbed the last ones in the Force and flung them high, straight up until their metal framed cracked the ferrocrete ceiling.

Finally he let both feet touch the ground. His leg was aching badly, as was his shoulder. His clothes were soaked in

sweat and breath raked his lungs. His heart was pounding and he smiled. He never felt more alive than in moments like this, when he'd won mastery of all around him.

Eli pulled off the blindfold and noticed, for the first time, that his master was standing against the far wall. He hadn't sensed her during the fight; he'd been too concentrated on following the remotes. Darth Talon stalked straight up to him, expression cool as always.

"That was an acceptable performance," she said.

"Thank you, Master."

With a flick of the wrist, Talon summoned all five remotes with the Force and assembled them on the floor in front of her. She crouched low, touched the two pieces of the one Eli had severed, and said, "There are other ways to destroy."

"I know. I knocked the other four out with the Force alone."

She looked over the other remotes, then stood. "You were in tune with the Force there. You commanded it to do your bidding and it did."

Compliments from Talon were rare. "It was a good practice, Master."

"It could have been better," she said, then added, "I have just met with Darth Nihl and Darth Havok. They have been examining what we brought back from Mustafar."

Eli hoped the long wait was over. "What have they determined?"

Talon shrugged bare shoulders. "Not as much as they wish. The passenger in that pod was killed with a berythium compound, a common poison. The syringe was rigged to inject once we opened the pod door."

"Who was the passenger?"

"We do not know. We examined his blood for traces of midi-chlorians. They were few. He was only vermin."

That made the situation all the more confusing. "Why were we sent a dead man?"

"I don't know. His corpse was taken apart, organ by organ. We took apart the pod as well. There was nothing hidden inside either."

Eli hissed frustration. "Do we even know for sure it was sent by Lady Maladi?"



“We were summoned to Mustafar by an encoded message. Only the most senior of Lord Krayt’s Sith knew that code. Many of those are dead.” Her eyes narrowed. “Perhaps the traitor Darth Wyyrlok shared it with his daughter. Saaraï is still unaccounted for. It was either her or Maladi who sent the message. We are confident of that.”

“Then what can we do?” Eli was sure Talon hadn’t come just to tell him they’d learned nothing.

“We examined the navcomputer aboard the pod. It recorded a journey from Averam to Mustafar. Every jump before that had been wiped clean.”

“But Averam is a place to start.”

“Indeed. Darth Nihil has decided that we will investigate. You and I.”

Finding Darth Maladi- or Saaraï- was a critical mission, and Eli swelled to know he was being entrusted with it. “Then we will get to the heart of this,” he said firmly. He didn’t know how, but he believed it. They would make the Force show them a way.

Talon nodded. “Follow my lead at all times. You still have much to learn.”

“I know.”

Talon stared at him; he sensed skepticism in her stoic face. Then she said, “Stand aside, apprentice.”

Awkwardly, Eli backed away until his shoulder-blades pressed against a cold ferrocrete wall. He watched as Darth Talon activated the four intact remotes, watched as they began to circle her. She didn’t even ignite her lightsaber, and when the first remote opened fire she nimbly hopped over its blast. The remote behind her fired but she was already ducking. Soon all four remotes began firing at once but Talon evaded them all.

She was constantly in motion and Eli watched the scene before him in awe: snapping limbs and swirling lekku, a constant writhing of scarlet and black. More, he felt her it in the Force as when gave herself to the dance. He felt not fear or anger, as he often drew on, but pure willpower. Talon desired to know the motion of the remotes, and she knew. She danced and dodged and weaved around them at near-blinding speed and when she decided the show must end she

ended it. Two remotes collided, smashing both globes. She knocked another out of the air with a sideways kick and plucked the last with her hand and crushed it inside a fist.

When she was done she stood in the middle of the wreckage and fixed her cool, controlled gaze on Eli. He was overcome with admiration and all he could do was smile.

Yes, he still had much to learn, but Eli was an eager study.

## Chapter Nine

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Ania Solo had a certain familiarity with spaceship repair yards, especially ones of vague legality on backwater worlds where you had to scrape together parts from a dozen junkers just to make your client's one fly. When she first spotted the place called Rugo's Chopyard she almost felt like she'd been taken back to Carreras Minor, before she'd met Jao or Sauk and gotten swept away on the crazy current of history. This job on Socorro was bringing back all manner of unexpected memories.

She'd spent the last night freely and publicly spending some of her newly-earned credits on the *Crimson Axe*. Her head still mildly ached from taking too many shots of a drink she hadn't even heard of, but the night had still been fruitful. At one point during the evening two big drunken Brubbs, each sporting a scarlet Bloody Bones tattoo on his green skin, had explained that *Crimson Axe* was undergoing some badly-needed repairs thanks to the a skilled mechanic Rav had strongarmed into working for him. The mechanic, they'd said, worked half her time at the Chopyard as she tried to wrestle free of the crushing debt Rav had saddled her with. She had a real gift with machines, apparently, and Rav was determined to keep her under his thumb as long as possible.

It was a depressing story, and hardly original. Rav- the way he used people, the way he made himself king of this squalid little kingdom- brought back worse memories than Carreras Minor.

Ania tried to put all of that out of her mind as she and Sauk walked through the Chopyard's unlocked front gate,

maneuvered around plenty of piled-up machinery, and followed a series of rusted signs to the shanty that probably passed for a shop and office.

The first thing they heard when they stepped into that squalid space- low ceiling, every wall and most of the ceiling covered by spaceship parts- was a voice that sounded like a posh Core butler fighting narcolepsy.

It said, "Greet.... am See... Pee... ations... How... assist you?" Ania spotted the battered remains of an old protocol droid on the far countertop, propped against a back wall. Its photoreceptors pulsed bright and dimmed as it tried to speak.

The sight sparked another memory, much fresher. Ania barely had time to place it when a human girl with long dark hair and engine grease smearing her face ducked into the room. She opened her mouth to speak as her eyes met Ania's. Recognition sparked between them and surprise stopped their tongues.

Sauk cleared his throat and asked, "Can we speak to the owner?"

"I'm the owner," the girl said.

Ania stared at her. She looked seventeen, eighteen standard years, max. Ania instantly knew this girl was as alone as she had been when he'd started up her shop on Carreras Minor.

"My name's Kyra," the girl added. She started to extend her hand for a shake, realized it was clutching a rag almost as dirty as the hand, and pulled it back.

"Call me Ania. This is my friend Sauk."

"All right." Kyra's eyes darted to the Mon Cal, then back to Ania. "What can I do for you?"

"A couple things. One, we're looking to rent a cargo speeder. Doesn't have to be anything fancy, we just need to move stuff through Axetown to our ship. Can we rent something like that here?"

"We just do repair work. But there's a place down the way that might rent you something like that. A Rodian called Greeptha owns it."

"Thanks, we'll look into it."

Ania didn't budge. Kyra asked, "Was there something else?"

There was. Ania and her friends had talked over a half-dozen ways to subtly approach Rav's employee and ask her to sabotage parts of *Crimson Axe* for them. Those all went out the window the moment she realized who, exactly, she'd be dealing with.

Instead of working her way toward a bribe, Ania put her hands on her hips and observed the vast array of spaceship parts clogging up the store. "You really run all this by yourself?"

"I'm good with machines," Kyra said defensively.

"There's a lot more to running a junk shop on a hole like this than working machines."

Kyra simply nodded. She'd know that already.

"I used to have something kind of like this. Wasn't that long ago, actually."

Still guarded, the girl said, "You seem to be doing better nowadays."

Ania tried a smile. "You were at Rav's place when we made the sale. I remember the droid." She started walking around the shop, feigning interest in its junk. "What do you do for Rav? Fix up parts of his ship?"

"Basically."

"How long has he had you do that for him?"

"Not long. Only about a week. He needs air circulators and power couplers replaced."

That might work. "Has he had you work all over the ship, then?"

"I've started to learn my way around."

"How long have you worked at this shop?"

"I've been here three years," Kyra said.

"You couldn't have been running this place the whole time."

"No. I was an assistant. The old owner... died." Her voice went soft with sorrow; sorrow for the dead, sorrow for herself.

Ania knew how this story went. She knew it too well. Finally turning back to the girl she asked, "I bet the owner was in debt to Rav, and now you have to carry it, right?" Kyra nodded stiffly. "That's how he roped you into fixing the inside of his ship too, I bet."

"I've paid off everything Rugo owned. But it's not enough for Rav."

"I thought so. I know his type, way better than I'd like to."

Ania saw curiosity in Kyra's dark eyes. There was something beneath it; need and desire turned to quiet desperation. There was skepticism in it too; a girl who'd lead Kyra's life wouldn't trust strangers easily.

"Listen," Ania said, "You know who we are, and you know we've come into some good money. If you're willing to do a little side job for us, we'll give you enough credits to get off this rock and get free of Rav."

Hope and wariness warred in Kyra's voice as she asked, "What kind of job?"

"My friends and I want some inside access to *Crimson Axe*. Stuff Rav doesn't want us to see. I bet you've got good schematics of the whole thing, right?" Kyra nodded. "How about access to his security systems?"

She wagged her head. "Rav would never trust me with that. I'm just his... his worker. But..." Kyra gained a thoughtful smile. "I think I can cut power to specific security nodes without setting off the others."

"That's what we're looking for," Ania said. "If you can get us those schematics, we should be able to pinpoint which security nodes need to go dark. If you can do that for us, we'll make sure you're never indebted to Rav again. You know we've got the money for it."

"No." The girl looked at her hard. "Can you take me with you?"

That took Ania by surprise, but it shouldn't have. She remembered what it was like to be young and trapped. She looked sideways at Sauk, and though he said nothing she could tell he was wary. He had every reason to be; there was no guarantee this girl wouldn't run their whole plan back to Rav, and Jao and AG-37 wouldn't be thrilled at picking up an extra crew member out of nowhere, especially one they knew nothing about.

But Ania saw too much of herself in this girl not to go with her gut, so she said, "Yeah, I think we can give you a ride. But we'll need your help first."

"That's no problem."

Suddenly energetic, Kyra dashed over to the back counter and reached into the bag leaning against her droid. She pulled out a datacard, plugged it into an old holo-projector sitting on the counter, and turned it on. After a series of flickers, the holo-image resolved to show *Crimson Axe*'s tall blunt body. The outer shell faded to translucency, revealing a network of corridors and shafts inside.

With a new light in her eyes, Kyra turned back to Ania and Sauk and asked, "Okay. Where are you trying to go?"

It was too good to be true, too unlikely, too absurd. This was probably all going to end badly. Kyra kept telling herself that over and over but it couldn't dampen her anticipation. The following day, instead of working inside *Crimson Axe* in the morning, she made an excuse to come in the evening. Rav hardly seemed to care; his attention was more focused on the gambling going on in the *Axe*'s casino, located two levels down from the Golden Gorg.

Kyra stopped there too before getting to work. Rav himself was nowhere to be seen, but his one-horned Devaronian lieutenant was in the room, and like most of the crowd his attention was focused on the longest dice table. There was, apparently, no rule against droids gambling, though management had objected anyway when AG-37 attempted to roll. The Devaronian had only put up a limited fight; no one, not even Rav's meanest thug, seemed willing to push a towering assassin droid. The fact that this one seemed well-spoken and mild-mannered somehow only made him more intimidating.

While most of the attention was on the gambling droid, Ania converged with Kyra in the shadows far side of the room. She slipped Kyra a small personal comlink and said, "Buzz me when you're sure security on the lower hatches is down."

"I will."

Kyra squeezed it tight. The little metal cylinder was her key to freedom. This Ania Solo kept strange company, and Kyra only knew a little about her- apparently she'd helped save the empress or something- but deep in her gut she knew she could trust the older woman, the same way she'd known

she could trust Rugo. It wasn't just that she seemed better than Rav; Kyra was desperate but not stupid enough to run off with the first person to show her a little kindness. She *knew* deep down, in a way she couldn't express, that Ania would help her.

Still leaning close, the older woman said, "When you kill the security systems, head to where I told you."

"Deck thirteen, main lift tube," Kyra recited. "But just because I shut down the security alarms doesn't mean you can ride the lift all the way down to... to...."

"The sarlacc pit."

"Right. Rav'll still have it set up where you can only ride to the bottom with his access code."

"We won't need it. Trust me. My friend Jao will meet you there."

"The Imperial Knight?"

Ania nodded.

Kyra considered. "Where will you be?"

"I'll stay up here with A-gee and Sauk. We'll create a distraction. But you should go down with Jao just in case he has problems getting all the way down."

Kyra wasn't sure what she'd be able to do, wasn't sure why this Jao needed to get down into the sarlacc pit when a second team was going to be going in through the *Axe's* lower hatch. There was still a lot about this she didn't understand, but she wanted to trust Ania.

She knew not to linger here. People might start looking in their direction soon, and she didn't want to give Rav's crew any hints of what was coming. Kyra nodded firmly and said, "Okay. I'll be there."

"Good. Just follow Jao. He'll take care of you," Ania said, then slipped back to the dice tables.

Kyra turned and left the room, moving quickly despite the heavy droid strapped to her back. She'd brought Sleepy as usual, even though she didn't need him for this. Rav's people expected to see the broken droid, and more, she wanted to make sure she had him. Though just a droid, Sleepie was the closest thing she'd had to a friend since Rugo died. If there was one thing she wanted to take with her from her years Socorro, it was her friend.



She'd memorized what she needed to do, what power couplings to disable in order to short-circuit the security alarms. That was her role; after that Ania and her friends would sneak inside the *Axe's* lowest levels and from there access the sarlacc pit beneath, where Rav kept all his greatest treasures. Kyra still didn't know the specifics, but she had to trust they had a good working plan. She had to believe the others would take care of the rest, and then they'd get her away from here.

As she approached the first coupling Kyra muttered, "We're almost done here, Sleepy. This time I really mean it."

Standing on the rocky rim of the sarlacc pit, looking up at *Crimson Axe* rising high against a starry sky, brought back all kind of feelings in Cade, none of them good. He'd been at this angle, more or less, when he'd first laid eyes on the ship. When Rav had found him drifting in space over Ossus after the massacre at the temple and the murder of his father. When they'd reeled him in with a tractor beam and he'd felt so disappointed at the realization he was going to live.

Looking back, he was glad he'd survived, but it taken him a long, long time to feel that way.

"Hey! Hey, Cade, you gonna stand there gawking?"

Jariah's voice brought him back to reality. He looked down the pit's steep slope, toward the hole *Crimson Axe* had fully plugged. In the dark it was hard to spot Jariah, but of course that was the point of doing this in nighttime. He eventually spotted the other man, halfway down the incline, waving one hand and pointing with the other. He followed the gesture and spotted the auxiliary access hatch, a simple square not quite flush against the rest of the hull. It was seven or eight meters above the bottom of the pit, which meant they'd need the right equipment.

Cade hurried back over the rim, down to the place where they'd parked the industrial-grade flatbed repulsor transport they'd rented. The thing was hovering dark and silent over the rocks, but when Cade approached a blue glow lit up near the control console and R2-D2 whistled faint greeting.

Cade clapped the droid's dome, bent low, and pulled three fibercable-reel guns from the nearby case. Artoo was

plugged into the speeder's control systems and would be able to fly it right up to the *Axe* for loading.

"Just hold tight, Artoo," Cade whispered. "I'll give you the signal when we're ready."

The droid chirped understanding, then went dark again. Slinging the heavy guns over his shoulders, Cade made his way back over the rim and into the pit. Slowly he side-stepped his way toward his friend.

"Just got a call from Ania," Jariah explained when Cade got close. "Says we're good to go."

"Great. Time to do some thieving."

Cade still wasn't entirely clear on how Ania had arranged for the *Axe*'s local security systems to go down, but as long as it worked, he didn't care. He handed Jariah one cable gun and armed another himself. The third one, an industrial-use model, he kept slung over his shoulder. The damned thing was heavy and he hoped he wouldn't have to carry it for long.

Once their cable guns were armed, tiny red light-projections guided their aim. The lights tracked up the *Axe*'s vertical hull, then stopped on either side of the hatch.

"Ready?" asked Cade.

"When you are," said Jariah.

Cade pressed the trigger; Jariah did it a half-second later. The cables shot out and up and attached to the hull with magnetic clamps. Holding the guns with both hands, they reversed the cable feed and allowed themselves to be reeled up to the hatch. Cade planted both feet on the hull for stead, carefully let go of the cable gun with one hand, and removed the lightsaber from his belt.

"Hope they really killed those alarms," muttered Jariah.

"Only one way to find out."

With the twitch of a thumb and the flick of a wrist, Cade cut through the heavy security latch on the bottom of the door. The lightsaber blazed only for an instant, then he hung it back on his belt. Gripping the cable gun with two hands again, he reached out with the Force and swung the heavy metal plate upward.

With a little extra Force-push for guidance, Cade swung himself feet-first into the accessway, releasing the cable gun's magnetic clamp at the same time so he could take the

device with him. Jariah did the same, just as nimble even without the Force.

As they crouched in the low corridor, Jariah whispered, "Home sweet home."

"If only," Cade grunted. "You remember the way to the main lift shaft?"

"I think I do."

"Then let's get going."

Being back aboard *Crimson Axe* wasn't an experience rich with pleasant nostalgia, but it had to be done. Rav did most of his business in the ship's upper decks, and sure enough they didn't run into a soul as they crept around the lower levels' maintenance corridors. A long time ago, they'd both bunked in this part of the ship, maybe one or two levels up. It was where Rav stuck his least-important crew. At night they'd fallen asleep to the rumble of old air processors and the clank of cooling systems; it was something they'd just gotten used to.

Those days were far behind and they'd get farther still. Cade recognized the main lift when he saw it. It ran down the *Axe*'s spine, top to bottom, and was designed to transport heavy cargo, with wide doors that opened from top-to-bottom. It made sense Rav would use it to move booty all the way down, past the ship's lowest levels and into the sarlacc pit.

As Jariah watched, Cade used the Force to pry open the doors. They were massive things but moved them smoothly, easily. When they were fully open, Jariah and Cade moved to the edge and stared down the long, black drop.

"Charming," Jariah said, then craned his neck up. "Pretty sure the lift car's way above us."

"It had better be." Cade slung the heavy cable gun off his shoulder. "Let's get dropping."

He began to attach the heavy gun's magnetic clamp to the upper frame of the door. Then, grabbing it with both hands, he stepped off the edge and began his controlled descent. Using his lighter cable gun, Jariah did the same, and they dropped together. Though light here was dim, they could see where the initial body of the *Axe*'s lift shaft ended and an extension had been welded onto it using different materials.

They'd dropped fully beneath the *Axe* now and were going further into the dark. Jariah thumbed on the glowlamp attached to his belt and cast bright white light across the shaft's smooth metal walls.

Then, abruptly, they reached the bottom. Their feet clanked on metal and when Cade turned on his light he could see that they'd hit a level landing platform built over a cavern's jagged rock floor. He passed his lamp across the chamber, highlighting ribbed stone walls and the artificial angles of piled crates.

"Tell me this is it," Jariah whispered.

"Let's find out."

Leaving his fibercable dangling down the shaft, Cade hurried to the nearest crate. It was a meter wide on all sides, with a keypad lock on the top, lightly dusted. He ignited his lightsaber and made careful cuts around its upper edge, taking off the crate's top without stabbing so deep he might damage the contents. When it was done, he and Jariah removed the cut-off lid and looked inside.

Their lights gleaming, blindingly bright, across smooth golden slips of aurodium ingots, arranged in neat piles and mounted nearly to the rim of the crate.

"Jackpot," Jariah breathed. "Oh stang it, Cade, we found his stash."

Cade felt ebullient too, but tempered himself. "Finding it's the easy part. Now we gotta get this stuff outta here. Send a signal to our buddies, let 'em know we're inside."

"Got it," Jariah said and took out his comlink.

While he made the call Cade lifted his light to scan the rest of the chamber. He counted off the crates as he spotted them, mentally subtracting the two Ania and company had sold to Rav just a few days before. The count mounted and mounted to nearly a dozen square-meter containers, each one probably laden down with enough booty to give his crew a lifetime of luxury.

For a moment he felt dizzy; then he went to work.

Confirmation came with a buzz in Ania's pocket. She extracted herself from the dice table, where crowds still gathered to watch AG-37. Standing in the same dark corner

where she'd talked to Kyra, she listened to Jariah's words. Even with the low volume and static fuzz she could hear the enthusiasm in his voice.

After that she thumbed over to Jao's frequency and whispered, "They're in."

"Good. On my way to the lift shaft now."

"Make sure you take Kyra down with you."

"All right," he said after a tiny pause. He hadn't been crazy about Ania enlisting a new team member.

"Go now. We'll keep them distracted up here," Ania said, then killed the transmission and hurried back to the show.

She joined Sauk on the opposite side of the oblong dice table from AG-37. After making sure one of the droid's photoreceptors was facing her she tapped her bottom lip three times, signaling that it was time to ramp up the distraction.

AG-37's only show of compliance was to go on a winning streak. Thus far he'd been using his calibrated mechanical limbs and analytical droid brain to control every throw of the dice perfectly, sometimes winning, other times losing on purpose. Now he scored one correct roll after another, and Ania watched with muted glee as horror seized the face of Rav's Devaronian lieutenant. During the past few evenings Ania and her comrades had made a point to lose twice as much money as they won at Rav's casino and cantinas, thus ensuring they'd be welcome tonight. Now AG-37 was clearly making it all back with exponential speed.

Normally when high rollers started taking a casino hard, management would step in to distract them with free drinks or intimate companionship. Neither of those would work on AG-37, so the Devaronian had to try a different tack.

Ania and Sauk circled around the table close enough to hear the Devaronian say, "I think you've done well enough now, ah, Master Droid."

Without turning from the table, AG-37 swung his lower photoreceptor sideways to look down on the Devaronian. "I would prefer to continue gambling."

"You've done more than enough dice rolls, Master Droid. Perhaps you'd like a game of cards next?"

"I familiarized myself with your protocols before visiting this evening," AG-37 said calmly. "There is no prohibition on how long I am allowed to stay at a single game. I am doing well at this one and have no intention of interrupting my progress."

"Other patrons would very much like to try their hand. Be *reasonable*, Master Droid. Consider their interests."

"I am, as you have likely noticed, an assassin droid. While I have long surpassed the limits of my original programming, I can assure you that deference to organics was never part of my design."

No mere organic could say it so calmly, and so threateningly. The Devaronian gritted his pointed teeth, then ducked away.

Ania quickly filled his place at AG-37's side. "He'll bring help next," he warned.

"I am quite aware," said the droid. "Was that not our goal?"

It was, Ania thought, and she wondered just how far Rav would go once he showed up. The longer they kept him occupied here, the longer Skywalker, Jao, and the others would have to pillage his secret storehouse.

AG-37 kept on rolling and he kept on winning. Ania had never known he'd had this kind of skill, and found herself regretting that they'd never cash in on his big score. Not that it mattered; they'd soon take Rav for more than they could ever win at a dice table.

The Devaronian must have gone straight to his boss, because less than five minutes after he'd left the Feeorin pirate himself came clomping into the casino wearing an angry smile. He had a couple of his own droids with him, old but refitted YV-models by the look of them. Ania had no intention of messing with those, especially since blasters were prohibited in the casino. Like Sauk, she'd left hers aboard *Free Agent*.

Rav went straight for AG-37 and said with fake cheer, "Never in my day did I expect to see a droid dominating my tables. Thought you were made for other purposes."

AG-37 lowered his dice-hand and turned to face Rav directly "Were you constructed for your current purpose?"

The Feeorin chuckled, "No I suppose I was not." He still had the angry smile. "Listen, friend, I'm going to insist you cash out now."

"As I told your lieutenant, I reviewed the house's rules very thoroughly. There is no proscribed time limit one may spend gambling."

"The rules also say the house can refuse service at any time." Rav jabbed a green thumb at his chest. "I'm the house and I'm refusing. I'm being generous, now, 'cause you and your friends sold me something useful. I'm asking you to leave. Next time I won't be polite."

Ania glanced at the two YV droids waiting silently a few meters away. The crowd around the table, thick a minute ago, had almost entirely dissolved in anticipation of possible violence.

AG-37 stared down at Rav with both photoreceptors for a long, tense moment. Then he said, "May I try your sabacc tables?"

"I said you could cash out and go."

"Your lieutenant offered me a game at your sabacc tables. Is that no longer valid?"

"It's no longer valid," Rav growled. "The house says so."

"I see. How disappointing." AG-37's top photoreceptor swung to Ania and Sauk. "Are my compatriots also ejected? I believe neither has won a net gain from you this evening."

"You're all going back to your ship," Rav said. "Thank you kindly for your patronage but please don't come back again."

"I see. How disappointing," said the droid. "I had finally gotten the hang of this game."

Rav growled again and looked around the room. "Where's that Imp you brought along? I don't see him."

"He went back to *Free Agent* early," Ania supplied. "Didn't like the atmosphere."

"Didn't expect him to." Rav turned back to AG-37. "You're cashing out now. We agreed?"

There were ways to keep stalling Rav without pressing their luck. AG-37 tipped his head in imitation of a human nod. "We are agreed. Thank you for the entertainment these past few nights, Master Rav. It has been quite enlightening."

"I'm sure it has." He snapped his fingers and the YV droids stomped forward. "Escort these barves to the cash booth, won't you?"

The two droids chirped affirmatives. AG-37 turned and moved slowly for the door. Ania and Sauk did too, acutely aware of the blasters pointed at their backs.

Ania also noticed when the Devaronian lieutenant appeared. She didn't like the way he hurried up to Rav, nor the worried look on his face. He bent the Feeorin close and whispered to him, and when he was done Rav turned back to his high-rolling guests with a deeper scowl than ever.

Ania decided they were in trouble.

"On second thought," Rav said, "Take our guests to level thirty-one. Make sure they sit tight there. I'll be up shortly, for a conversation."

The YV droids chirped again. Ania knew what they had to do next and hated it. If she'd have had a blaster on her she might have felt a little more confident, but only a little.

All she could so was look up and whisper, "A-gee, I think it's time."

"Agreed," he said. "Get down."

An assassin droid, of course, was never without weapons. Ania and Sauk ducked and covered their eyes. She didn't see AG-37 pulled out a flash grenade or hear it pop, but her eyes stung even with red eyelids squeezed shut. She felt AG-37's hard metal hand pulled her upright, felt it push her forward, and with eyes still half-closed she joined her friends in sprinting for the lift tube. As she threw herself into it, as the doors hurried shut and the lift shot them upward, he fumbled for her comlink to tell Jao and the others their time was nearly up.

Jao had been more or less expecting things to wrong at some point on this job, and when he got the call from a breathless Ania he was actually relieved the wait was over. That lasted all of a second; then he realized how much trouble they were in.

"Sounds like Rav's on his way," he called to the others in the dark underground cavern.

"What does that mean?" asked Jariah.



"I don't know. Ania says they came under fire. She thinks they're on to us."

Skywalker's response was a growl. Jao looked around the cavern again. Since he and Kyra had descended to the bottom of the lift shaft via fibercable, he and Skywalker had used the Force to move half the crates full of bullion over to the metal landing pad. Kyra, despite the clunky droid on her back, had gone to work attaching magnetic clamps that locked the crates to the industrial-grade cable Skywalker had brought down with him. That still left almost half the crates to secure, and they'd yet to destroy the ones containing Sith artifacts. The sight of all that bullion had dazzled Jao, but destroying the Sith material was still his main priority.

He quickly took stock of their options. If Rav or his goons came down, their freight lift would slam directly on top of their crates. It would probable snap the fibercable on the way down, too.

There seemed only one choice. "We've got enough," he told Skywalker. "Let's set the charges to blow, then ride out of here before Rav catches us."

Skywalker looked reluctant, but Jariah said, "I agree. We've got enough, Cade, and we'll make sure Rav can't get the rest of it."

Skywalker sighed. "You gonna set a big boom, Jariah?"

The other man grinned weakly. "You know me."

Jao took that as assent. "Okay, let's go. Kyra, are those cables secure?"

The brown-haired girl- he still didn't know what to make of her- looked over the bound-up crates. "I think so."

"I'll double-check." Skywalker hurried over to the pile.

Jao sidestepped to Jariah, who'd slung the bag of explosives off his back. "What do you have in there?" he asked.

"I packed a variety," the other man said. "You wanna do the honors on the Sith goods?"

"Very."

"I don't wanna make a big boom until we're all the way outta the shaft, you understand?"

"Yes, but I'm still destroying those crates."

"Fine." Jariah pulled a metal sphere out of the back. "Standard thermal detonator. Set for medium circumference and you should be able to vape the Sith stuff without bringing the whole mountain down on us."

Jariah held out his hand, but before Jao could grab the detonator a rumbling sound descended from the shaft and his heart creaked.

"They're on the way! Damn!" Skywalker shouted.

Kyra froze beside the cargo crates. "What do we do?"

"Aren't you the tech expert or something? Can't you shut that lift down before it gets here?"

The droid on her back muttered, "Negat... power.... higher level..."

"Great," Skywalker snarled.

The hideous scrape of metal scraping metal sounded far above, and Jao knew the lift was falling past the fibercables they'd dropped from the thirteenth deck. They were probably seconds away from snapping. The only way those crates were getting out of this chamber was the way they were meant to: up the freight lift.

Jao realized that they might be able to pull this off yet, and he shouted to Skywalker, "Help me move the crates! We need to let it land!"

He extended a hand and reached further with the Force, grabbing the piled crates and dragging them across the metal platform, out of the path of the falling lift car. After a second Skywalker joined in, and together their minds worked to share the weight of the crate, dragging it onto the rugged stone floor of the cavern.

With that done Jao released his grip, but Skywalker summoned the Force to move more crates, building a barricade in the middle of the chamber. Jao instinctively looked for the two crates of Sith artifacts and watched as Skywalker added them to the top of the pile.

"Come on, we don't got time to blow 'em!" Skywalker said. "We'll use 'em as cover. *Maybe* we can pin Rav's guys inside the lift car and take 'em out. You got blasters?"

"Just my lightsaber."

"I don't have anything," Kyra said, voice quavering. She was clearly having second thoughts about this.

"Fine, leave it to me and Jariah. Imp *bukee*, you help defend. You, girl..." Skywalker scowled. "Just keep both your heads down."

With the piled crates between them and the landing platform, they scrambled for cover. Kyra slung the broken droid off her back and bent low; Jao could see her shaking and wished he could do something to calm her, but there was no time. The roar of the falling lift was almost on them.

Skywalker dropped to his knees and leaned against a crate. "Y'know, I really wish we had that assassin droid of yours right now."

"He's occupied," Jao grunted and gripped his lightsaber tight.

"I know. Just saying is all." Skywalker took his double-barreled rifle, checked the charge, and nodded to himself. "Kark it. We'll roll with what we've got."

As she crouched behind the bullion crates, bent forward so far her forehead touched the rough stone ground, Kyra cursed herself for being so stupid. She'd grabbed onto a flimsy hope and thrown her life away. She'd wanted escape from Rav's clutches; she'd never wanted to die.

Beneath the pounding of pulse in her ears she heard the rattle of the lift as it slowed for set-down, heard Skywalker and Syn ready their weapons, heard Jao ignited the sizzling pure-white blade of his lightsaber. She'd never see one of his kind in action before, and in other circumstances she'd have stopped to gawk, but right now she was too afraid to look. To do anything except tremble in paralyzing fear.

The lift cracked down onto the landing pad. She heard its door hiss open, and then the tang of laserfire and the hum of a moving lightsaber. She made out the clack of metal feet- probably Rav's security droids- and a shout raised above them, probably Rav himself.

When death didn't come immediately she pulled up from her crouched and looked around. Laserfire continued, cutting over the rim of the crates and over her head. Skywalker and Syn continued to pump laserfire toward the lift, and Jao was on his feet, deflecting blasts as he tried to edge his way closer. She realized she didn't hear the thud of plasma bolts

impacting on the crates themselves. Rav must have been afraid of accidentally destroying his own treasure and limiting his attack. Syn had plenty of explosives but was afraid of breaking the lift and trapping them all down here. It was an impasse.

Then the chamber was filled with the pounding of metal on rock, and she knew the impasse was over. Two YV-model droids slammed themselves into the barricade of treasure-crates, knocking the top ones over. Kyra yelped and scampered aside, but a droid stomped after her. Her knee hit hard rock; pain spread out and she rolled onto her back to see the YV looming over her. Kyra threw up both hands as if to throw the droid back. To her surprise the thing staggered, as though it had been hit by invisible force. But it stopped for only a second, then continued its advance.

And then Jao was there, placing himself between her and the droid. His pure-white lightsaber moved in a deadly frenzy, shearing off the blaster attached to the droid's right arm, then it's left, then separating hip-plate from thigh. As the droid toppled over he made one more strike, severing head from shoulders. Elegant and lightning-fast, he was like nothing Kyra had ever seen; she was struck with admiration and awe.

Back at the remnants of the barricade, Syn was firing at the two droids and one Feeorin who remained inside the lift car, all still popped out lasers of their own. The remaining YV droid outside the lift fired a few shots at Jao, easily deflected, then pivoted to shoot at Syn. Skywalker swore and tossed his gun to the other hand. Then a lightsaber appeared in his fist and a green blade shot out in an underhand grip. He howled, threw himself into the air like a projectile, and landed boots-first on the droid's torso, knocking it off balance without tipping it over. At the same time he swung his right arm like a punch; his first missed the droid's face but his blade did not, slicing the ovoid head's in two.

The droid still kept struggling but Syn rolled onto his back and pumped a series of laserblasts that scorched its torso. It collapsed under Skywalker's feet and the man remained atop it as he pivoted toward the lift, deflecting shots with his lightsaber while pumping his own out of the double-barreled

rifle. Whereas Jao had fought with precision and grace, Skywalker was a feral animal, seemingly unstoppable.

"Damn you, Cade!" Rav shouted from inside the life. "You're supposed to be *dead*!"

"Sorry to disappoint, you ugly old *murglack*." Skywalker grinned like a hungry panthac. "You want me dead you're gonna have to come in here and get me! 'Cept, oh wait, then you might ruin your treasure!"

"Damn you, Cade!" Rav repeated.

Jao crept back toward Syn and Skywalker, deflecting laserfire that still burst out from the droids inside the lift. He spared glances at the ground, at the crates that had been tipped over and spilled. He looked over his shoulder at Kyra and briefly dipped his blade toward the floor, signaling for her to gather up the goods.

After watching the bravery of the two Jedi- or whatever they were- she found courage to comply. Staying low, scampering on hands and knees, she hurried over to the closest spilled crates. She recognized black-stone carvings, blades weapons. It was the material Jao and Ania had sold Rav in the first place.

Still on her knees, she scooped up the artifacts and dropped them into the two spilled crates. All the while Jao, Skywalker, and Syn continued to fight, steadily rising from behind their crates and pushing toward the lift. Rav could easily order the thing to rise back up, leaving them trapped down here while he gathered more reinforcements. Kyra was a little surprised he hadn't done so already. Any moment now the three of them would charge and fight, and she-

Her eyes cast the reflection of light across something smooth to her right. Head low she looked over, felt out, and picked it up. It was one of those black pyramids Jao had shown Rav. In the clamor of the Golden Gorg that night she'd had a hard time hearing what they'd said, but it was clearly some kind of precious artifact.

As she held it close, cupped within her palm, she saw light emerge from its edges, converge in front of her face, and assemble into the form of a woman with a hood covering most of her face.

The woman said, "My name is DARTH TRAYA. For what purpose to you seek my knowledge?"

Before Kyra could think, before she could say a word, she heard Skywalker give another battle-cry. She stuffed the black pyramid into her tool-bag and scampered back toward the lift, where the fight was joined in earnest. Syn hung back, giving covering fire as Skywalker and Jao charged the gates. Rav and his droids tried to use the lift's sliding doors as cover but the Jedi cleaved through them, lightsabers burning molten seams through metal and slicing deeper. One droid sputtered after taking a cut through the torso; another lost an arm. Then Jao and Skywalker were inside the lift, obscured from Kyra's vision. She rose to her feet and hurried toward them, rounding the crates, rounding Sleepy's torso on the ground, coming in behind Syn when he entered the lift.

Smoking pieces of the droids covered the lift's floor. Among them she spotted Rav's three-clawed mechanical foot. Then she saw the lord of Axetown himself, slumped in the corner, glaring up at them with one murder-filled eye. When it lit on Kyra his scowl got a little bit deeper, and she felt a rush of triumph.

Just because Rav was down didn't mean they had time to celebrate. Cade said as much as they hastily cleaned out the droid parts and began moving crates onto to lift, with their hands and with the Force. Rav was still pressed against the corner of the lift when he growled at Cade, "I made you, *bukee*. I can still break you. You think you'll be safe anywhere in the galaxy after what you pulled?"

"I'll have all your *grancha* riches, so yeah, I do." Cade slapped the top of the nearest crate.

"I claimed them, *bukee*. Those are *mine*."

"You *stole* them, Rav. You're a kriffing pirate. Well so am I, and now I get my proper share of the booty- and then some."

"You? You're just a whiny little Jedi whelp, crying over his dear dead papa."

Rav was trying hard to get to him, make him angry. Against himself, Cade felt it working. He bent down and grabbed the Feeorin by the neck. Skin and muscle yielded

beneath his fingers, tempting him to squeeze harder. Rav reached for his face but Cade's other hand came up, lightsaber blazing, and Rav withdrew the arm before it got cut off.

More than once he'd wanted to kill Rav with his own hands. The thought tempted Cade still; it would gain final revenge for all the manipulations, the insults, the abuse. They only had to flit through memory to rile his old anger. With anger was something new: a rush of power he'd never felt before when dealing with Rav. For so much of his life he'd been at the pirate's mercy; now the tables had turned, and it gave him dark and tempting joy.

But the anger Rav roused was part of a deeper anger, one that sprung from the grief he'd felt when Rav had pulled him from space over Ossus and condemned him to live ten years back.

Cade was past that now. He was past Rav. Finally he could prove it to himself.

"I've dealt with worse enemies than you, *sleemo*." Cade shut off his lightsaber. With his hands and the Force he hurled the Feeorin out of the lift. His one-legged body went rolling across the rough stone floor, where there were only two crates remaining, both open.

Cade took a deep breath and turned to the others inside the lift: Jariah, Jao, that Kyra girl with half of a droid strapped to her back again. To them he said, "Let's get going. No time to waste."

As Cade reached for the lift control panel Jao said, "Wait, what about-"

Jariah slapped him on the back, laughed, and tossed the silver sphere of a thermal detonator to his friend.

"Of *course* I was going to blow it up you dumb Imp!" Cade laughed. "What do you think I am, a Sith? You set the yield, Jariah?"

"Just the right size of boom."

"Excellent." Cade armed the timer and shouted to Rav, "Better get crawling just in case!"

He threw the detonator underhanded, looping it right into the open crate of Sith artifacts. Then the doors slammed shut, the lift shuddered to life, and they began their ascent. Over

its clank and hum, they barely heard the detonator's explosive pang. Jariah knew his booms; it sounded big enough to atomize those two crates but leave Rav and his empty treasure-cave intact.

The lift stopped where they'd come down, deck thirteen. There was still a lot of cargo to carry out of here and not enough hands. They set to work quickly; there was no telling when more of Rav's people would arrive, and they had to know by now that something was very, very wrong. Jariah and Kyra took a crate between them; Cade and Jao started moving theirs with the Force. They had to make several trips from the lift to the outer hatch to move all the crates, and as Cade hurried back to the lift he pulled out his comlink and flicked it on.

"Artoo?" he called, "We're about ready to go here. What's the sitrep?"

The droid tweeted a reply, which Cade got, more or less. "Get that sled ready then and move it up to the hatch. We'll start loading it up."

R2-D2 whistled affirmative. Cade switched freqs and said, "Tell me you're there, Blue."

"I've got *Mynock* standing by for an extract." She currently had their ship parked on another butte twenty kilometers away.

"Great. We got the goods, *mesh'la*. Now all we need is a ride out. Warm up your engines and get ready to dance." Cade rounded a corner and reached the lift. One more trip would clear it. He asked, "What happened to *Free Agent*?"

"They took off with a couple of snubfighters chasing 'em. I lost track of 'em after that, but I think they pulled away Rav's air support."

"Good. Warm up *Mynock*'s auto-turrets just in case."

"Will do." After a tiny pause she asked, "You run into Rav?"

"You could say that. I'll tell you about it later. Love you, Blue."

"Right back at you."

Cade pocketed the comm and surveyed the cargo: three crates left. He realized he wasn't alone and turned to see Jao regarding him curiously. Cade remembered his last words to



Deliah, the lapse into tenderness. Not wanting the Imperial to think him soft he said, "Cargo won't move if we just stand here, Imp *bukee*. Think you can move two at a time?"

Jao nodded curtly. "Can't you?"

Cade grinned. Kyra and Jariah arrived soon after and took a crate between them. Cade and Jao used the Force to levitate the rest down the halls until they reached the hatch. Jariah pushed it open and there was the repulsor-sled with R2-D2 plugged into the controls, nudging the hovering flatbed closer to the hatch.

"You've almost got it, Artoo! Just a little more!" Jariah called, and when metal clanked against metal he shoved the first crate over, then followed it onto the flatbed.

Jao and Kyra helped push the next crates over, with Jariah receiving. Over the clatter of moving cargo, Cade almost missed the sound of approaching feet. He grabbed his lightsaber and turned it on just in time to deflect a volley of laserfire that lanced at them from the far end of the hall.

"Finally!" he shouted. "I was starting to think Rav's crew's really dropped off in quality since the old days."

"Just our luck," Jao grimaced and reached for his blade.

"Just move the goods, Imp *bukee*. I can hold 'em off," Cade said.

It was a narrow corridor, barely wide enough to swing his lightsaber around in. The blasterfire was constant and heavy but the Force flowed through Cade and he caught them all. He'd never understood how *easily* the Force could come until recently; once he'd been clogged up inside with pent-up grief and anger but that was gone now, or mostly gone, and with his heart cleared up the Force could move him and move through him the way it was supposed to.

For a long time he'd hated having the Force at all, but that was another stage he'd moved past.

When Jariah announced the cargo was all loaded, Cade backed his way down the corridor until he felt fresh breeze and heard Artoo's happy beeping. Without having to be told, the droid jerked the repulsor-sled away from *Crimson Axe* and sent it shooting out through the night.

"*Chuba inkabunga!*" Jariah laughed as he clung hard to the sled's guard-rail. "We did it!"

Pressed against the flatbed with a face full of wind, Cade took out his comlink and called, "Hey, Blue! We're ready for pickup! See us?"

"Got you, Cade." She sounded a lot less exuberant. "I see a couple of Aratech bikes coming toward you too."

"Ah, stang," Jariah breathed, and crawled over to the control panel. "Give me helm, Artoo."

"This thing will maneuver like an old bantha," Kyra scowled as she struggled to sit upright.

"Don't need it to get us far." Jariah rose up on his knees and began working the controls. They were holding a steady altitude, maybe seven meters above ground and on level with most of the rooftops in Axetown. The speeder bikes were coming in behind them all right, and Jariah pushed them ahead as fast as the clunky sled's repulsors could manage. That wasn't much; the bikes would be on them soon enough.

Cade scanned the sky for the lights of Mynock's engines but found nothing. He was about to call Deliah again when Jariah jerked the controls violently to the right, nearly tipping Jao and a couple of crates over the guard-rail.

"Hey, watch it!" Cade warned. "What are you doing?"

"Going to make a straight-away across the plateau," Jariah said. "Tell Blue to scoop us up when we're out in the open."

"Sure." Cade thumbed the comlink and said, "Could use a little help here, *mesh'la*!"

"Almost there! Hang on!"

The bikes were getting close now, and apparently they didn't realize what precious cargo the sled was carrying, because they started pumping laserfire from their under-carriage cannons. Those weren't powerful guns but they'd easily fry the sled and send its passengers falling to their deaths. Cade pulled out his rifle and began pumping shots at the bikes, warding them off even though they were too nimble to hit.

And then, without warning, both exploded into fireballs over the edge of Axetown. As their repulsor-sled cut free above the butte's flat stony top Cade looked around wildly, expecting to see *Mynock's* familiar red form flying low. Instead it was another ship, with a longer body and conical forward section. *Free Agent* to the rescue.

“Well,” Cade breathed, “I’ll take ‘em as they come.”

A few seconds later *Mynock* appeared as well. Deliah knew exactly how to pick them up. She lowered the landing ramp on *Mynock*’s belly, dropped altitude, and swooped in from behind to scoop up the sled and pull it inside. It wasn’t a soft impact by any means, even with Jariah working their helm. The sled’s bottom scraped hard against *Mynock*’s deck and bounced them violently. His teeth cracked together inside his head and for a moment Cade literally saw stars. Then the sled slammed into the rear bulkhead, knocking them about again and tipping a few crates over.

As Cade struggled to clear his hurting head, he heard Deliah’s sweet voice over the intercom. “You there, boys? Are we okay?”

It was Jariah who answered, “A-okay, Blue. Any pursuit?”

“Negative. *Free Agent* says they cleared off all their tails.”

“Are they all okay?” Jao asked.

“Best I know, sweetie. We’ll rendezvous with ‘em soon enough and count our hard-earned money.”

The deck seemed to swell beneath them as *Mynock* gained altitude and made for escape velocity. Cade, sprawled on the flatbed, finally sat fully upright and looked around. The crates were all askew but intact- minus, of course, the two full of Sith *poodoo* he’d atomized. Jao looked dazed but intact. Jariah was getting to his feet. Kyra was too; the battered half-a-droid she’d been lugging around lay on the bed, photoreceptors still pulsing.

Then there was R2-D2. The droid had still been plugged tightly into the repulsor-sled’s control socket and seemed less knocked around than any of them. As Cade slowly got to his feet, the astromech removed his utility-arm from the socket and released a stream of beeps and tweets. He wheeled across the flatbed, around a strewn crate, and rolled right into the dented head of that beaten gold protocol droid. R2-D2 started bumping the droid repeatedly, beeping and tweeting all the while. Cade couldn’t make out much, but it seemed like an ecstatic song of joy.

He’d never seen the droid act like this, didn’t understand it, but he right now he didn’t care. That electric warbling seemed the perfect note of triumph.

Cade clapped the droid's blue dome and said, "You're right, buddy. We won." He grinned and breathed out long. "We won."

## Chapter Ten

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When Azlyn went to the medical center that morning to see Ganner, she sensed something was wrong as soon as she entered the building. He wasn't in the quarters he'd been assigned in the observation level, and when she asked the nurse droid she was directed to one of the evaluation rooms. As she hurried there she reached out in the Force and sensed his presence, but there was something strange about it, something faint. She tried to nudge him and get a response, but none came. He didn't seem to notice her.

Getting truly worried, she nearly jogged down the last hallway to the room where he was supposedly held. Standing outside the door were two beings she hadn't expected to see: Treis Sinda in his red armor and brown-robed Master Solus, the elderly Jedi she'd met on Talus. They were speaking with a silver medical droid, and when they saw Azlyn she felt their surprise and wariness.

Cautiously she said, "I came to visit Ganner. Can you tell me what's happened?" Solus looked down; Sinda fought a scowl. She insisted, "I know he's alive. I can feel him. Is he hurt?"

"Physically, he is all right," said Solus.

Azlyn's hands tightened to fists. "May I see him?"

The two masters exchanged looks. Sinda said, "You can enter, but you cannot speak to anyone of what's inside, not until I say so. I need your word, as an Imperial Knight."

Azlyn stiffened and held his piercing gaze. "You have it, Master Sinda."

“Very well,” the older Knight said, and tapped the button to open the door.

Azlyn stepped inside. Solus, Sinde, and the medical droid were right behind her but she went straight to the far side of the room. In an eerie echo of the room on Talus, Ganner and the Rodian Jedi Kel Yobis were both dressed in white and laying on medical beds, side-by-side. They had no intravenous plugs attached to them this time. Both were awake and shifted upright to see Azlyn approach. More medical droids flanked each bed but either told Azlyn to halt.

“Azlyn!” Ganner sounded surprised. “I’m sorry. I’m... I forgot you were coming this morning.”

“I tried to reach out to you just now, in the Force. Didn’t you feel it?”

“No.” His eyes shifted over Azlyn’s shoulder to Sinde. The older Knight gave him a go-ahead nod. “Azlyn... I can’t feel the Force anymore.”

“What are you talking about? I can feel you.” She could, but there was something strange about him she couldn’t describe. It was almost like she was peering at him through a dirty window, or uneven glass.

“It happened to the Jedi Yobis last night,” Solus said. “He felt faint for several hours, almost feverish. When his senses cleared he realized he could no longer use the Force. He slept overnight, but this morning he still couldn’t use it.”

“I had a difficult sleep last night,” Ganner said. “And this morning... I felt nothing.”

Azlyn sensed for the Rodian. She knew him far less well than Ganner but there seemed something distorted about his presence also. Somehow these two had gone deaf to the Force.

She looked at the medical droids. “How did this happen? It must be something they did to them on Talus.”

The closest one said, “Require specification. Identify antecedent for adjective *they*.”

Sinde ignored the request and told Azlyn, “We’re running in-depth bloodwork now. Surface scans show nothing wrong.”

Azlyn hugged herself. “It has to be *something*. They must have been poisoned, or injected with something...”

Solus said, "The medical droids examining Knight Yobis and Master Krieg found single injection points in their arms where intravenous fluids were put into their bloodstream. Based on minute abrasions around the injection points, it's possible they were used more than once."

"Something else may be the cause," Sinde added. "Force-users have been stripped of their power before. Some think it happened to an entire race with the Yuuzhan Vong. The means of doing it are beyond us... but maybe someone's uncovered them."

"But they've been back on Coruscant for over a week. Why is this happening now?"

Sinde shook his head. "We can't say yet. Master Rae, I'm ordering you to keep this private until we discern the cause. If word gets out that Force-users are losing their powers it could destabilize the entire triumvirate."

Azlyn looked back to Ganner. Over the past week he'd been stuck in a cycle of restlessness and anger but now she saw deep dread. The unknown danger had revealed itself in a way they'd never expected. Somehow, someone had robbed both knights of the Force and sent them back to their orders. It was a threat and a boast.

But for Ganner, it was something far worse. She looked into her friend's face and read his thoughts clearly. He believed his world had ended.

Shado Vao's first hint that something big was in store for him came from his sister. After being orphaned at a young age their lives had taken different turns, and he often thought Astraal's was the more unlikely. Whereas Shado had joined the Jedi Order, where his Force talents were allowed to flourish, Astraal had stayed with the Imperial mission where they'd been taken in, and had risen in the ranks of that organization, promoting the peaceable, benevolent aspects of the Imperial machine. In time she'd become a friend and confidant to Marasiah Fel herself, and now worked for the empress as an aide.

They were both on Coruscant now, geographically closer than they'd been since they were children, but they still saw too little of each other. With everything else going on he was

surprised when Astraal commed him in the morning and asked if they could meet for a cup of caf. There were places readily available for that in the lower tiers of the palace, and the two Twi'leks did not look out of place amidst the government workers catching something quick to get them through the morning.

"The empress says the triumvirate is getting ready to act." Astraal was hunched over her steaming cup. "It's going to be a joint mission, with people from all three parties."

Shado sensed anxiety from his sister, but nothing beyond what he felt himself. Ganner Krieg and Kel Yobis had been sealed away in the medical center for over a day. He knew Master Solus had been in and out to see them, as well as several other Jedi healers and probably some Imperials, but they were all guarding the specifics closely. Shado hated that; he'd gotten repeated reassurances that Ganner and Yobis were alive and not in mortal danger, but beyond that, nothing. Perhaps the rumors were true, and they really had suffered some Sith brainwashing, but if so they'd need to be kept in a prison, not a hospital.

"Do you know where?"

"I'm only the empress' aide, Shado. I don't get to sit on her meetings with the triumvirs." Astraal blew steam from her cup, then added, "You've had a lot of experience working with Imperial Knights, Shado."

That was true; not all of it had been good. "If I'm a candidate for this mission, Grand Master K'Kruhk can tell me. I don't answer to the empress."

"No. But I think the triumvirate will want to pick agents they can all agree on."

"Astraal, I'll do everything I can to get to the bottom of this. You can tell the empress that. I'd even stomach her husband if she asks me to. What happened to Ganner and Yobis... It's got everyone on edge. Especially since yesterday."

He let his question stay implied. Astraal shook her head. "I don't know any more about what's happened to them than you do."

"But the empress does?"



“The empress is the empress. She knows as much about what’s going on as anyone.”

“No,” Shado said. “Not unless she’s the one that started this.”

Astraal nodded grimly and took another sip.

When they parted Shado went back to his quarters, but not for long. Astraal must have went straight to the empress; less than two hours after their chat, he received orders from K’Kruhk to report to the executive wing of the palace.

When he reached the assigned chamber he was surprised not to find the grand master waiting for him. Neither the empress nor husband were present either. Instead there was just a small table, with Azlyn Rae sitting at one side. When he came through the door she looked at him in surprise, as though she’d been jerked from a stupor.

“Good morning, Azlyn.” He tried a smile. “I didn’t know you would be here. I received summons thirty minutes ago and wasn’t told much.”

“Neither was I.” He sensed thoughts churning inside Azlyn and her desire to share some of those worries with Shado, but she kept her lips sealed tight.

Shado took the chair opposite hers. Azlyn shifted her gaze slightly so not to look at him. A minute of silence passed. Finally he said, “I talked with my sister this morning. Astraal said the triumvirate was looking to put together some joint mission. I’ve worked with Imperial Knights before, and you... you have connections with the Jedi.”

“A mission to where?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think she did either. I expect we’ll find out.”

Azlyn nodded. Her gaze dipped down to the tabletop. She stared at it as though looking for an answer. Though the Force yielded no proof, his gut told him that Azlyn knew more about what was going on in the medical ward. She’d been making daily trips to see Ganner as he was kept there for observation. If anyone would have been able to slip through the wall of silence, it would have been her.

But he also knew that if he asked, she wouldn’t answer. That would widen the wedge between them so instead they sat in awkward silence until the door opened again.

Two figures walked inside, both wearing blue-and-brown Alliance military uniforms. One was a tall Duros, instantly recognized across the galaxy. The other, not quite as famous, was a human woman with dark complexion and bright eyes.

Shado rose to his feet in greeting, and Azlyn followed. He said, "Good morning, Admiral Stazi. It's an honor to see you again."

"At ease, Master Jedi," the Duro waved a green hand. He and his companion took the remaining seats at the table. "I believe you both know Anj Dahl, leader of Rogue Squadron."

"We've met," Shado said.

"It's really because of Commander Dahl that we're here today. I'll give a short introduction, then let her explain the rest." Stazi folded green hands on the tabletop and let his gaze pass between Azlyn and Shado. "The Jedi investigator looking into Knight Yobis' kidnapping on Nubia was able to obtain crucial information. We have a recording of Yobis being assaulted by men in Mandalorian armor. When showed the recording, he admitted to having no memory of the events."

Mandalorians. Never a good sign. It was, however, surprising. Though they'd done work for the Sith in the past, they seemed to have holed up in their home sector since midway through the Sith-Imperial war, and had stayed mercifully out of the recent conflict.

"Furthermore," said Stazi, "Nubian flight control provided us with a thorough listing of incoming and outgoing craft and we've identified one vessel of recent MandalMotors manufacture whose coming and going seems to match Yobis' capture."

Azlyn said, "I thought Yobis was taken to Talus on his own ship, like Ganner. Master Krieg."

"He was, but his kidnappers still needed their own ride to Nubia, and they probably didn't want to stick around after committing their crime," Shado reasoned. "But Mandalorians... Are we *really* sure?"

"No," said Stazi, "And frankly, our intelligence there is limited. The ruling Mandalore, Yaga Auchs, is very good at keeping other people out of his business. However, an

avenue of investigation has opened up. I will let Commander Dahl explain in detail.”

Shado and Azlyn looked to the other woman. She seemed slightly embarrassed by the attention; from what Shado remembered she was informal and unpretentious, more at home in a cantina with her pilots than a high-level conference. He also remembered that she was more than an elite pilot; Rogue Squadron doubled as a commando unit, and its versatility had been key during the war against Krayt.

“I don’t think either of you ever met him,” Anj began, “but in Rogue Squadron we used to have a man flying for us named Hondo Karr. Hondo was a good crack pilot and even better in a fistfight. He got along well enough with the other Rogues and he didn’t let people get close to him, which spawned all kinds of rumors. One was that he used to be a Mandalorian, then ended up posing as a stormtrooper before hooking up with the Alliance. That one was true. Hondo’s been all those things, but he was a Mandalorian first and forever, and toward the end of the war he went back to his people.”

“You mean he went to join Yaga Auchs?” asked Shado.

“The dead opposite, actually.” Anj gained a slight smile, maybe wistful. “Hondo and I went on a mission to Azzim the Hutt’s place on Napdu, before the Sith vaped it. It was mostly going well until this Mando in gold armor jumped out and started shooting at us. The Mando was his wife Tes, and she thought Hondo had killed her father on Botajef, during their last battle there twelve years ago. Hondo managed to convince her that wasn’t true, that Auchs was responsible. They left Napdu together to go take revenge on Auchs.”

Shado tried to process all that. “So you’re saying... an ex-Rogue is an enemy of Yaga Auchs.”

“That’s right.”

“But Auchs is still Mandalore.”

Azlyn said, “You wouldn’t be telling us this if you hadn’t already made contact with Hondo Karr. Right?”

“Right,” Anj nodded. “We Rogues do some commando and espionage work, and we have some very private, very secure comm frequencies that only we know about. I was able to use one of those to contact Hondo. He’s still alive and

still with his wife. They're working with a bunch of other Mandalorian dissidents who want to bring down Yaga Auch's."

"Do they know anything about what happened on Nubia?" asked Shado.

"That's what we're going to talk to them about. That's too confidential to do remotely, even on our private freqs."

"*We*," Azlyn repeated, and looked to Stazi. "One Alliance, one Imperial, and one Jedi."

The admiral nodded. "The triumvirate, represented. This may be a long-term mission. You're to work with Karr and do whatever's necessary to find the people responsible for what happened to Krieg and Yobis."

Shado hesitated, then decided to take the plunge. "Admiral, I have to ask what *did* happen to them? They've been sealed in medical ward for over a day. No visitors and no information's come out. Jedi aren't usually gossips, but the whole Order's full of rumors."

Very stiffly Stazi said, "I'm sorry, but I won't comment on that now. This is a decision the triumvirate reached together."

Well, Shado thought sourly, at least he'd tried. He asked Anj, "Where will we be meeting Karr?"

"Paqualis III," she said. "We've got an old YT-2400 freighter we can use, very inconspicuous. Return to your quarters, gather your things, and be back here in two hours. We need to get going immediately."

Shado nodded and glanced at Azlyn. She avoided his eyes and shielded herself in the Force; whatever she knew, she didn't want to share. Maybe that would change. They'd been good friends a long time ago; he, Azlyn, and Cade. Whatever was happening, he hoped it didn't push them further apart.

The final battle with the One Sith had devastated large swathes of Coruscant, and on becoming empress Marasiah had pledge to rebuild. She was following through with that promise the best she could, and had commissioned the construction of over a hundred new buildings in Galactic City alone. Two years after the battle the debris had all been cleared away and new towers were being added to the

skyline. The area south of Champianne was a forest of skeletal half-built skyscrapers and construction towers, with the most complete structures located on the district's northern edge.

These buildings were government-funded and government-controlled. Most would go to housing those left homeless or displaced after the battle, but Marasiah had made certain that some space was reserved for other purposes. The tower at which her personal speeder now docked was mostly used to house construction workers and bureaucrats overseeing the project, but a few levels were locked away from those without the highest security clearance.

With only Treis Sinde to accompany her, Marasiah made her way through the lifts and corridors, past the layered security doors, before she finally reached her destination. Before passing through the final door she told Sinde, "Please stay here. I'll call you if I need you."

"Of course, Empress."

He stepped to one side. Marasiah smoothed her white robes, then pressed the button on the door's control panel. She could faintly hear a chime sound on the other side. She waited twenty seconds and tapped the button again. The chime sounded and she waited. She was about to input her override code into the panel's keyboard when the door opened.

No one stood there to greet her. The empress stepped through the threshold and the door closed behind her, sealing her in a spacious apartment. Broad windows looked northward, toward Champianne's business district. This room was located relatively low inside the tower, but it was still a view many would envy.

Sitting on a white-cushion sofa near the window, facing Marasiah with her legs crossed and hands in her lap, was a single woman. She was on the far side of middle age but still thin and attractive, with green eyes and short blond hair.

"Good afternoon, Empress," the woman said without getting up. "You should have called ahead."

Marasiah ignored the last remark. She drifted to the middle of the room and looked around. Despite being well-furnished it had an empty quality; there were no decorations on the

pale walls, no piles of habitual clutter, though its occupant had been here for almost a year, kept under comfortable house arrest.

“Well, whatever you’ve came here for, I’m sure it was important. Do you want a drink? I *can* play host.”

“No. I think we should get down to business, Miss Calixte. Or would you prefer to be called Morrigan Corde?”

The older woman looked at Marasiah appraisingly. The empress did not often feel insecure beneath the gaze of others; the triumvirs were exceptions, and so was this one.

“Call me Morrigan Corde. Calixte was never a person,” she said. “Just a fiction I used for a while.”

“That ‘fiction’ betrayed the galaxy to the Sith,” Marasiah said icily.

“That was never my intention, but yes.” Corde hid her shame well, but it was there. “I did what I could to bring them down in the end.”

“I know. Otherwise I’d have never let you live.”

“Ah, living.” Corde looked around her comfortable, lonely apartment. “Is that what we’re calling this?”

Marasiah fought to keep her mind clear of anger. This woman’s machinations had pushed the galaxy into war, toppled her father from the throne, and contributed to his final, fatal fall into darkness. Antares and her uncle Hogram had recommended Corde be executed even in spite of her help at the war’s end; Astraal had argued for mercy. In the end Marasiah had made her own choice, the practical one. She’d kept Corde alive, above all, because she was a resourceful and talented woman who might be useful one day.

Marasiah hated it, but that day had come.

She sat down in a chair facing Corde and said, “During the Sith-Imperial War, the Alliance hired the Mandalorians under Chernan Ordo to defend the planet Botajef. In the middle of the battle Ordo was killed and Yaga Auchs took command. He withdrew his forces to Mandalore and has mostly kept them there since. At the time, you told my father that you had bought off Auchs and convinced him to retreat. Is that true?”

“That’s what I told him.”

“But was it true?”

Corde looked around the empty room. "I thought it was a stupid idea at the time. Your father was already suspicious about me, but Darth Maladi insisted I take the credit when she, in fact, bought out Auchs. My... relationship with the Sith was almost exposed there, but they managed to corrupt the Knight your father sent to Mandalore to investigate."

Marasiah knew exactly which Knight: Eshkar Niin, one of her father's most trusted advisors, who'd betrayed his oath, joined the Sith, and murdered her mother. He'd become Darth Havok, and his death had never been verified. After the Battle of the Floating World, Marasiah had personally inspected the corpse of every Sith, hoping to find her mother's killer. In her heart she knew Darth Havok was still out there. The thought of him terrified her, because she didn't think she could face him without being swallowed by black rage like her father.

"What did Maladi do for Auchs?"

"I'm not sure. My understanding is that the Sith loaned some covert aid in securing Auchs' power base. Disappearing or brainwashing competitors, that sort of thing. But that's very vague. Maladi didn't share her secrets with me."

"It's my understanding she was your primary contact with the Sith."

"She was. She told me only what was needed be useful in her machinations." Corde's eyes narrowed. "Is Darth Maladi dead?"

"Her death at the Floating World was never confirmed." Just like Darth Havok.

"I'm not surprised. She was never a front-line warrior. Besides, she was much too smart to fall into Darth Wredd's trap." Corde's face relaxed into a self-pitying smile. "Nyna Calixte was quite the manipulator. Veed, your father, the Moff Council. She could handle them all. But Maladi... Keeping ahead of her was the real challenge." The smile tightened to a frown. "Empress, what's going on?"

Marasiah leaned forward, elbows on knees. "Morrigan Corde, on my order, you are going on a mission. You're going to find what's left the Sith for me."

Corde stared, face blank, thoughts shielded from the Force. After a long minute she said, "Excuse me, Empress, but I'm going to make myself a drink."

She got up and went over to her kitchen without asking the empress if she wanted one. Marasiah listened to glass clink against glass and waited until Corde returned with a tumbler of amber liquid in hand.

"All right," Corde said. "Tell me."

"A little over a week ago, a Jedi Knight on Nubia was kidnapped by a squadron of Mandalorians. He was tracked to a medical facility on Talus and recovered, along with one of my Imperial Knights, who was abducted from Belgaroth. Neither has any memory of the incident, and the best Force-healers in the Jedi Order have failed to piece their minds back together. I believe we were meant to find these men, that they were left for us as a message."

"By the Sith?"

"I don't know, but I'm treating that possibility with absolute seriousness."

Corde sipped her drink and considered. "What happened to the two knights? Were they hurt or altered in any way?"

Marasiah swallowed. This was a secret the triumvirate had pledged to keep close, but she'd come here deciding to betray that trust. It was the only way to assure help from Corde.

"At first they seemed utterly fine, barring the memory loss. As of yesterday morning, however, those knights have lost the ability to touch the Force."

Corde frowned. "What does that mean exactly?"

"They can't do it. I'm told others can feel them in the Force. They're not like Yuuzhan Vong and they still exist in it, but they can't sense it at all."

Corde gave a bitter grin. "Then they're stuck living like ninety-nine percent of the galactic population? How terrible for them."

"We're facing an enemy who can strip us of the Force. The entire existence of the Imperial Knights and the Jedi may be at stake." She leaned a little closer. "I know what you were, Morrigan Corde. Your first husband was a Jedi, and your son."



"Both dead," she said bitterly.

"I was told you loved them. Do you want to see all they've stood for vanish from the galaxy?"

"No," she allowed.

"Do you want Darth Maladi and her Sith to have unchallenged dominion over the Force?"

"Of course not."

"Good. Then you will use all your knowledge and resources to hunt them, all the little secrets I'm sure you kept from our interrogators. You will answer to me, and only to me. Do you understand?"

Corde swallowed a mouthful of her drink. "I suppose I have no choice."

"You don't."

"Of course not." Her smile was tight and wry. "You don't come to visit me very often, Empress, but I must say, each time you do, you seem more and more like your father."

Marasiah bit the inside of her lip, gathered herself, and said, "I'll provide you with a ship and equipment, including weapons. You'll be given every scrap of data we've gathered about suspected Sith activities over the past two years."

"That's very generous." Corde leaned back into the sofa's cushions. "Though I admit, I'm surprised. It almost seems like you trust me."

"Never."

"I didn't think so. But you're giving me all that... and then what? How do you know I won't just fly your spaceship off to the Outer Rim somewhere, disappear, and start a new life? I've done it before."

"You won't be going alone. I'm sending an agent with you."

"Ah." Corde sipped her drink, probably already considering ways to dispose of her keeper.

"You will not kill or betray this agent. You will not trick this agent either. I've selected someone who knows all about your machinations and will never, ever, fall into the trap of trusting you."

"Well, now I'm *really* flattered. Who have you given this vital task to?"

“Your daughter,” Marasiah said. “I know Gunner Yage is a pilot, but I understand she was given intelligence training, including field work, by Nyna Calixte.”

Corde’s face went slack in genuine surprise. It was a glorious sight to see, but she recovered quickly and took another sip from her glass. “I was wrong, Empress. You’re much more crafty than your father. There may be hope for you yet.”

## Interlude: A Long Time Ago...

Two bodies sat in cross-legged poses, facing each other from two meters apart. Rather than resting on the chamber's floor they hovered in the air so the folds of their loose black robes dangled just above the hard tiles. Without the touch of ground to distract them, the two Sith Lords could separate their minds from the profane world and give themselves entirely to the task they had set themselves: imposing their will upon the Force and tipping it toward darkness.

The ethereal battle was led by Darth Plagueis. It had been twenty-five standard years since he'd killed his master, Darth Tenebrous, to become the galaxy's premier Sith. Every day of that time had been building toward this moment. While Tenebrous had seen the Force as a power to draw strength from, like a starship's engine core, Plagueis had developed a more refined understanding of the mystic power that governed the universe. The Force's energy was not just to be drawn on; it was to be *commanded*.

By studying the midi-chlorians that bounds lifeforms to the Force, Plagueis had determined that a proper combination of Force-exertion and scientific skill could modify the behavior of the life-giving microbotic beings. It was his dream to command midi-chlorians so fully that he could control life and death, most importantly sustaining his own corporeal existence forever. Yet always there was pushback, as though the Force had a will, as the Jedi preached, and that will was resisting his effort to change it. He'd been told that his

master's master, Darth Acheron, had torn a hole in the Force through blood sacrifice and sheer willpower. Plagueis was attempting to repeat that feat to an even greater extent with the aid of his apprentice.

Darth Sidious was a human of middling age, a Republic senator from an antique Mid-Rim world called Naboo. Plagueis himself was a banker, chairman of the powerful Damask Holdings Limited, but he had retired from public life over a decade ago to devote himself to studying the dark arts. Sidious had feigned an extended holiday to join Plagueis on the Sith Lord's hidden estate of Aborah, on Muunilinst, where they could enter so deeply into the Force they separated themselves from time and space, even their own bodies.

With only faint tethers left connecting them to crude matter, Plagueis and Sidious worked as one to wrestle the Force into submission. All that was the same in each Sith Lord harmonized and they acted as one, fueled by their pride and ambition and anger and ruthless, iron determination to wrench their desires from the intractable vastness of the cosmos. It was an experience beyond words or mortal feeling, yet after days or months of timeless battle they felt their efforts reaching crescendo. Their collective life-essence reached across the stars, and the great dark power summoned through their midi-chlorians spread out through endless ether to touch the midi-chlorians of every other being galaxy-wide, from the weakest child to the greatest Jedi Master.

For an infinite instant Plagueis and Sidious felt as though they were looking down on them all from a superior height. The weak children and Jedi Masters felt these new intruding minds and looked up at the figures above them, squinting into the blinding darkness, seeing nothing clearly but knowing everything had changed, that a power greater than anything they'd known had suffused itself into the Force. The collective power that was Plagueis and Sidious was great enough to affect the whole of the Force itself, shifting it away from its natural balance toward darkness. The Sith could feel a tremor of collective fear shudder through the galaxy; it brought them joy that allowed them to tip the balance even further.

Their great task accomplished, Plagueis and Sidious finally withdrew into their bodies. After neglecting their corporeal forms for so long, Plagueis found himself beset by aches. He was an old Muun, critically damaged by an assassination attempt a decade before. When he lifted his hands off his knees every joint groaned in protest. Air scraped like knives through his lungs and crackled through his breath mask. His small yellowed eyes opened to find Sidious seated across from him. The human looked as gaunt and gray-skinned as a Muun, but triumph lit the eyes of his haggard face.

Sidious' jaw hinged open. His voice creaked out: "It is accomplished."

Plagueis nodded. Too weak to rise, he tapped the communicator on his wrist to summon 11-4D. His personal servant, a multi-armed bipedal medical droid, arrived promptly to inject both Sith with necessary fluids, then provided them with food and water. Plagueis found he was not hungry, but Sidious consumed the bland, nutritious rations with a starving gusto.

"Would you like a summary of events that transpired while you meditated?" asked 11-4D.

"Not yet." Plagueis raised a hand. "There is something else we must do first. Lord Sidious?"

The human raised his face from the half-gobbled ration bar. "Yes, Master?"

"It is time to test our triumph. Fourdee, help us to our feet."

The droid did as ordered. When Sidious and Plagueis were both standing upright, 11-4D guided them out of their meditation chamber and through the bowels of the Aborah facility. It was here that Plagueis had assembled his most valuable treasures, passed on through generations of Sith Lords. Ancient historical texts and valued Sith artifacts mixed with an extensive laboratory Plagueis used to perform varied experiments on live subjects. While Sidious worked on Coruscant, subtly bringing the Republic closer and closer to collapse, Plagueis had labored on Aborah, focusing on the more esoteric aspects of the Grand Design.

Early in his own apprenticeship, he'd been taken by Darth Tenebrous to a similar secret facility on Te Hasa, deep within the Gree Enclave, where Tenebrous' master had worked.

Many of the experiments Plagueis conducted here were a continuation of Darth Acheron's research. Decades after Acheron and Tenebrous had both died, translators on Te Hasa were still sending him Basic versions of the ancient Gree archives. The long-lived aliens seemed content to continue their thankless work indefinitely so long as they kept receiving payment, and Plagueis had made sure they'd get regular installments from one of his many shell companies. The texts themselves were a scatter-shot of legends, rumors, and eye-witness accounts of events tens of millenia past, depicting the Gree's service to the mythic Celestials, their galaxy-spanning empire bound together by hypergates, and their eventual collapse to Rakatan aggression. The difficulty was that it was often impossible to tell which was truth and which distorted legend. Nonetheless, some critical information might be buried in those archives, so Plagueis continued to fund their translation. The Gree requested a tiny fee relative to the staggering wealth of Damask Holdings.

Today Plagueis was not concerned with any ancient text or talisman. With Sidious and 11-4D beside him, the Dark Lord of the Sith came to his most valued possession. A gaunt, bulbous-headed Bith body bobbed inside a liquid-filled transparisteel tank. For almost a quarter-century, Plagueis had kept Darth Venamis on the verge of death. Once Darth Tenebrous' second, secret apprentice, he'd become a test subject like none other. Paralyzed from a toxin Plagueis had forced him to eat, the Bith exhaled no air-bubbles into the liquid and stirred not even a finger, but his black eyes were open and his trapped mind could see the three figures standing outside the tank. Trapped and conscious through all the horror inflicted on him, Venamis had surely gone mad by now, but he could do nothing to hurt his tormentors.

Plagueis allowed himself to feel a small twinge of sympathy; their fates had come very close to being reversed. He looked up at Venamis' ever-seeing eyes and said, "Now we are going to end it."

Venamis showed now response, could not show it. When Plagueis reached out in the Force, however, he caught a hint of relief shudder through the Bith's broken mind.

Then, with the glide of two hands over a control console, Plagueis shut down the mechanical systems that had been keeping Venamis alive all these years.

Paralyzed in his tank, the Bith gave no outward sign of dying. His body did not even shudder. Yet Plagueis felt his broken mind dwindle to nothing. He stared deeper into the very cells that made up the Bith's body, and he watched with glee as, one after another, his midi-chlorians dimmed and died. And then, after so much time, Venamis was just dead tissue floating in a tube.

A relief for Venamis; for Plagueis, the greatest test was now. He felt Sidious tense beside him, anxious and eager. After waiting ten minutes in silence to make sure the last embers of Venamis' life had gone cold, the Muun reached out and placed one hand against the curved glass. He closed his eyes and allowed himself to rise deeply in the Force again, forgetting this corporeal body and focusing his power on the dead midi-chlorians floating through the corpse's cells. After what he and Sidious had just accomplished, it felt easier to gather the energies of the Force, make them flow through his own midi-chlorians and into those of Venamis. He did not pass life energy from one body to another, did not give pieces of himself as Jedi healers did in their foolish altruism. Darth Plagueis was a Sith; he *commanded* the Force, and the Force obeyed.

After a timeless moment, the midi-chlorians inside Darth Venamis returned to life. The Force flowed through that body, still paralyzed and trapped, and life returned as well.

He heard Sidious gasp, speechless, and heard synapses flare inside 11-4D's cortex. "The subject was most certainly deceased," the droid reported. "Yet its life functions have returned. This is... not possible."

"Nothing is impossible... for a Sith," Plagueis said, tired but proud. He looked up at Venamis' inert face and felt the Bith's awareness return. First came the dull confusion, then the agonized realization that he'd been dragged out of death's sweet embrace. Then came the panic and the pleading to return to the void, all wordless.

"Master..." rasped Sidious in amazement, "I never thought it possible..."

"Things are not now as they were. We've tilted the Force inexorably toward darkness. It responds to us easily now. It *obeys* us. You can feel that, apprentice."

Sidious blinked. "And the Jedi?"

"The Jedi have felt our presence, but we have not fully revealed ourselves. Let them fear our shadow for a time. It will only make them weaker. We must perfect the power we've gained this day."

With that, Plagueis tapped the console before him. Life-support systems shut down and once again he felt Venamis' life dwindle to nothing and wink out, only this time, instead of relief, he died with a dread of being returned to life.

Plagueis had every intention of subjecting him to that agony. Once again he place a hand on the glass, closed his eyes, and allowed the great dark power of the Force to flow through him. It came even more easily than before, and after uncounted time he felt life return once more to Venamis' midi-chlorians. A deeper, physical pain seized this Bith this time, and Plagueis wondered how many such resurrections the frail body could take before the organs themselves irreparably failed. Coolly, curiously, he decided to find out. Darth Venamis had served in a way he'd have never imaging when he poisoned his rival all those years ago; he had nothing more to give. For reasons that had nothing to do with mercy, it would be best to let him die and stay dead.

"Yes!" Sidious hissed. The sound of his apprentice's harsh, giddy laughter drew Plagueis back into the profane world. He looked sideways at the human, whose face contorted with sadistic glee.

"We've really *done* it, Master!" Sidious laughed. "We command life and death *itself*!"

11-4D, nonplussed as only a droid could be, said, "This is quite astounding, Master. To my knowledge a feat like this has never been accomplished before."

"Because it has not," Plagueis said, with a heavier pride than Sidious. Far older than the human, more powerful and more learned, he understood all the millennia that had been leading to this moment, all the trial and error, all the different clashing methods different Sith Lords had tried in their quest to gain mastery over the Force. Yet finally, this day, unlike



any Sith before them, he and Sidious had accomplished a feat unknown to any Dark Lord. With that power came the responsibility to use it wisely, to further Bane's Grand Design and bring the Jedi to their knees.

But, Plagueis thought, there was no need to continue the tradition of Bane as they had before. No need for apprentice surpassing and killing master, over and over. He was no seer like Darth Tenebrous; he was not willing to trust the Design to successors unseen.

With the power they had obtained this day, there would be no need for successors.

Plagueis and Sidious would be the *last* Sith Lords. Plagueis was no seer, but certainty filled him. Today they had defeated death itself; with that conquered, and the Force subject to their will as never before, there was nothing left to fear.

For the rest of the day, Plagueis continued to experiment with Venamis. 11-4D watched and recorded every death and resurrection in microscopic detail until finally the Bith's wasted internal organs could take no more. Tissue ruptured irreparably from inside, and Darth Plagueis felt his one-time rival, his long-time victim, fade into nothing one last time. He felt that Venamis knew this was his last end, felt the Bith's relief. There was a dark beauty in his passing, and when he was gone Plagueis felt a twinge of melancholy. In his fashion, he would miss Venamis.

Sidious clearly felt no regret at the day's events, not even a small one. Despite his wasted appearance the human bristled with confident energy. He devoured another meal that 11-4D brought and stated his intention to return to the Coruscant soon. According to the droid they'd spent nearly two months in contemplation, weeks longer than Sidious had told the other senators he'd be gone for.

"When you get back to Coruscant, be alert to any action by the Jedi," Plagueis told him. "They have felt our presence in a way they never have before. They'll be on their guard."

"I assure you, Master, I have no problem hiding my presence from them," Sidious said with a smile.

"Then use your office as cover to get close to some Jedi. Look for the dissidents, the radicals. Dooku, Sifo-Dyas, Djin

Altis, Thracia Cho-Leem, Qui-Gon Jinn. People willing to speak their disagreement with the Council. The Jedi cannot afford to ignore what we've done here today. We must watch how they'll react."

"Of course, Master. Leave it all to me."

That had been Plagueis' intention for years now. Leave the machinations of the profane world to Sidious. Cunning and predatory, he had a mind suited for them. Plagueis would turn his attention inward, subduing the midi-chlorians inside until he'd wrench from them the treasure he sought most of all: eternal life.

After today he had little doubt he could do it. While he and Sidious had been locked in etheric battle he'd expected more pointed counter-attacks by the Force; thrusts against his midi-chlorians, boiling in his blood, renders on his flesh. Yet as much as the experience had drained both Sith Lords, the Force had resisted them with the stolid inertia of a great object, nothing more. When they'd succeeded in gaining proper leverage, they'd tipped the Force toward darkness with no resistance.

So much, Plagueis thought, for the Force's so-called 'will' that the Jedi bowed to. The will to power was the only one that mattered. Like the midi-chlorians within his blood, the Force itself was his to command.

## PART II



## CONTAGION



## Chapter Eleven

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Jermac was an ugly wreck of a planet, its scarlet surface pocked by the spice mines and marred by messy grey sprawls of polluted cityscape, and the reek of spice processing facilities filled the air and pollution-haze clouded out the sun at midday. It was a place where the locals reeked of desperation, either to get off that rock or to make it rich using any means necessary.

None of that mattered. After the successful heist from Rav and the escape from Socorro, there was nothing that could possibly dampen their spirits.

*Mynock* and *Free Agent* picked an isolated and rocky piece of terrain to set down on. It was like a replay of their first rendezvous on Ando, but far less tense. Ania was the first one down *Free Agent*'s landing ramp and onto the surface, where she saw Jariah and Kyra carrying a square-meter crate between them.

"Consider it the first installment of your share," Jariah said as they dropped the crate on the ground.

Ania pulled the crate back and looked inside. She went almost faint at the sight of so many shiny aurodium slips packed in neat rows. She asked, "Are they all like this?"

"Some are ingots. Others are more mixed up. All kinds of booty we can haggle over."

"How many crates did you get, total?"

"Seven. Every last one, except for the boxes of Sith *poodoo* we blew up." Jariah grinned broadly. "Your Impal's already trying to hack it out with Cade. The *bukee*'s

paranoid we're going to pull something on him and take your fair share."

"I know. I was counting he would be," Ania smiled back.

Jariah chuckled and turned back to *Mynock*. "Come on. You can see the rest of the haul inside."

As Jariah went up the landing ramp, Ania glanced at Kyra. The young woman wasn't looking at her, or the ships, or the box full of dazzling treasure. She was looking at the sky. It wasn't much to see as far as Ania was concerned; even far from Jermac's population centers the air was hazy from pollution. The thin gray clouds were almost textureless, but succeeded in dimming the sun to a white blur.

"There are better skies," Ania commented.

"It's the first new one I've seen in three years," Kyra whispered.

Ania let her look. After a respectful pause she asked, "How many planets have you been on?"

"Six. Seven. My parents... they got killed at the start of the war. The last one. I don't really remember them. I was on Sevarcos for a while. Llanic. Svivren." Kyra hugged herself tight. "Sometimes I thought I'd be stuck on Socorro forever."

"With this kind of money you can go anywhere you want."

Kyra nodded and kept looking at the sky. It was clear the money meant less to her than the freedom it brought, and Ania couldn't keep the smile from her face. She'd yet to wrap her mind around what this booty really meant, but she understood Kyra- her hopes, frustrations, dreams- more than she could say.

Her attention was drawn away by the clack of metal feet on *Free Agent's* landing ramp. AG-37 and Sauk stepped outside, and the Mon Calmari asked, "How much did they get?"

"All of it," Kyra exhaled and tore her eyes off the gray. "Seven crates."

Sauk circled around Ania and looked into the crate. Someone how his bulbous eyes managed to get even wider. His jaw worked for a moment before he asked, "What are we going to *do* with all this?"

Ania laughed. "Whatever we want, obviously. With this kind of score we'll never have to work again. You ever wanted to own your own private moon?"

Sauk looked at her, blinking, trying to discern if she was kidding.

"I presume the rest of the cargo is inside Skywalker's ship," said AG-37, as cool as ever.

"That's right. Jao's keeping an eye on Skywalker to make sure he doesn't try anything funny. Jariah brought this one down for us to take."

"Then I will move it inside *Free Agent*. You should join Jao and begin apportionment of the spoils."

"Sure thing." Ania put one hand on Sauk's shoulder, one on Kyra's. "Come on, let's go check out the rest."

As they walked up the ramp and into *Mynock*, Ania let Sauk go ahead and asked Kyra, "By the way, you get that droid of yours out?"

"I did," she smiled fondly.

"That's good. Droids are good friends to have. With the kind of money we've got you should be able to actually fix him up."

"I hope so. There's something... Well, you'll see in a minute."

Curious, Ania followed Kyra into *Mynock's* main cargo hold. Sure enough, six more crates of treasure remained. Jao and *Mynock's* crew stood among them, and when Ania got glimpses of what they held- more aurodium slips, nova crystals, antiques and art objects- she felt faint again.

"If you recall we had a fifty-fifty agreement," Skywalker said, tattooed arms folded in front of his chest. "Seven crates don't split in half easily, but I'm sure we can haggle out something."

"I'm pretty good at haggling," Ania reminded.

"I know," he grinned. "Anyway, I figure we'd best take our time, judge what we've got, then split the goods."

"Agreed. We're in no hurry." She went over to Jao and put a hand on his shoulder. "Thanks for watching the treasure for us. How'd it go in the sarlacc pit?"

"It got pretty hairy for a few minutes, but we got done everything we needed to."

"And those Sith artifacts?"

"I took care of them," Skywalker jabbed a thumb at his chest. "No need to thank me. It was *grancha* satisfying."

“What about Rav?” she asked seriously.

Skywalker’s smug smile became serious. “He came down to get his treasure personally. We sliced up all his droids and left him up there.”

“Did you kill him?”

“No. I thought about it, but like I said before, this is better punishment.”

He smiled again, fierce and proud. Ania simply nodded. She felt glad he’d made that choice, though she wasn’t sure if she’d have made it herself.

They resumed looking through their treasures. Kyra was the only one who didn’t seem to care. She slipped quietly to the side of the hold, where two droids were sitting. The half-bodied protocol droid had been propped up against the wall next to the astromech, and as Kyra approached it managed to say, “Greet... tress Kyra...”

Ania watched the girl pat the droid’s head fondly. The astromech released a series of warbles and tweets, but she couldn’t catch any meaning from it.

“Artoo’s been like that ever since we pulled that hunk of junk onboard,” Skywalker shrugged and called to Kyra, “Where’d you get that droid anyway?”

“He was in the junk shop when I got there. The old owner, Rugo, didn’t remember where he’d come from, and Sleepy’s memory isn’t much better than his vocoder.” Kyra shrugged and put a hand on its battered gold dome. “Where’d you get *your* droid?”

Skywalker chuckled. “Long story, kid. Even I don’t know most of it. But Artoo pulls his weight, no doubt about that.”

As Kyra sat down on the floor next to the droids, Ania asked Jao in a lower voice, “How did she handle stuff when it got messy?”

“She was scared at first, but she did pretty well.” Dropping to a whisper he asked, “She reminds you of you, doesn’t she?”

“Is it that obvious?”

“You both got orphaned in the war. She was even younger than you. And you both ended up in scrap shops, hanging out with droids...”



“Yeah. I guess it *is* obvious.” There were other similarities too, ones she wasn’t ready to share with Jao. “You don’t have a problem with us taking her aboard for a while, do you?”

“I don’t.”

Ania heard the unspoken *but*. “You wish I’d have asked first, right?”

“No, it’s not that.”

She raised an eyebrow, skeptical.

“It’s not *just* that,” he clarified. He glanced across the room to Kyra, still sitting with her droids, not paying attention. The others seemed distracted by all the pretty treasure. He whispered, “When we were down there, in the fight, I think she used the Force.”

Ania blinked. “You *think*?”

“Pretty sure. One of Rav’s YV-droids was charging at her but she pushed it back. I don’t think she knew she was doing it. The kind of life she’s had, I’m sure she’s never had training.”

“Huh,” she breathed, and felt a flicker of irrational disappointment. She and Kyra didn’t have everything in common after all. “What does that mean?”

“I don’t know. There’s no telling how strong she is, or if she can be trained.”

“She doesn’t strike me as Imperial Knight material.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Good.” She pressed a fingertip against his white-armored chest. “You’re not going to trick or bully her into doing something she doesn’t understand.”

Jao looked horrified. “I’d never do that.”

“I know.” She withdrew her finger, smiled. “I just wanted to be clear. She’s just like the rest of us now: filthy rich and free to do anything she wants.”

“No better way to be than that,” Skywalker said, and Ania spun around to see the man inspecting the crate behind her.

She was about to ask him how much of that conversation he’d heard when the sound of clanging metal feet joined the hold. AG-37 stepped amidst the treasure crates, upper and lower photoreceptors rotating in opposite directions to evaluate all the spoils.

"This," he said, "is an impressive collection. You are to be commended for pulling off such a heist."

"We heard you did your part in the casino, metal man," Deliah Blue commented.

"Yes, it was a pleasure to put those gambling subroutines to use. It had been a long time."

"Where'd an assassin droid learn to roll dice anyway?" asked Jariah.

"This is a complicated story. I believe—" AG-37 paused. Both halves of his conical head rotated so he looked at Kyra and her droids with both photoreceptors. Without explanation he stomped over to the wall and soon his shadow was looming over a seater Kyra.

The girl tried not to be intimidated by the towering droid. "Is there a problem?"

The broken protocol droid beside her said, "Greet.... ness.... perhaps you... thirty-seven?"

Ania started toward them. "A-gee, does that thing *know* you?"

R2-D2 released another series of squeals and started rocking back and forth on its short legs, as though it was trembling with enthusiasm. AG-37 interrupted, "Please, slow down and explain. Clearly."

Somehow the astromech calmed itself and began a long series of chirps and whistles. By now everyone in the hangar was starting to gather around the strange scene, except for Kyra, who looked between the three droids with an expression of utter bafflement.

When R2-D2 finally stopped vocalizing, AG-37's lower photoreceptor spun around and settled on Deliah. "Miss Blue, do you have a standard dual-phase neural jack aboard?"

The Zeltron looked as perplexed as the rest of them, but she nodded. "Yeah... Let me get it."

As she hurried off to wherever she kept her tools, Kyra piped in, "I don't understand. What's going on? Do you and Artoo *know* this droid?"

"The short answer, Miss Kyra, is yes, though Artoo-Deetoo knows him far better than I. The longer answer is *perhaps*, depending on how much of the droid's memory

core is salvageable and how much of his programming remains intact from those times.”

“I found him in the junkyard I worked at. I’m not that good with droids but I replaced his vocoder. It didn’t do any good. I think his neural processor’s all messed up.”

“Yes, those are my suspicions. If Miss Blue had a proper connecting jack I should be able to better evaluate the situation.”

“What times are we talking about exactly?” asked Skywalker. “Artoo’s been with my family for generations. Supposedly. I’ve never seen the gold guy before.”

“Yes, Artoo-Detoo says they’ve been separated for some time. Nearly a century, in fact.”

It was always weird to be reminded how old AG-37 was. Ania asked, “So you knew these droids *before* then?”

His lower photoreceptor swung on her. “You’ve known for quite some time that I am, shall we say, superannuated by human standards.”

“You don’t talk about your past much.”

“Will all due respect, Ania, neither do you. I thought we were respecting each other’s privacy.”

He had her there. Deliah appeared a moment later with a half-meter-long cable dangling from her fist. She handed it to AG-37 and asked Cade, “Did I miss any revelations?”

“Not exactly, but I’d say we’ve got a big karking coincidence on our hands.”

Softer, Jao said, “It’s almost like the will of the Force.”

Ania stared. So did Skywalker; he looked like he wanted to argue but wasn’t sure if he should. Ania didn’t get any joy from seeing him speechless; the sheer strangeness of AG-37’s discovery had pulled her mind away from everything else, even the grand treasure sitting at their backs.

AG-37 picked up the protocol droid’s torso and carried it over to one of the treasure crates. Understanding what he was up to, Ania quickly put the lid back on the crate so AG-37 could lay the broken droid atop it. After that he plugged one end of the cable into the back of the protocol droid’s neck and the other into his torso, right below the neck.

The group gathered around to watch, all silent except for R2-D2, who continued to tweet enthusiastically. AG-37’s

photoreceptors flickered; the protocol droid's shuddered and went dark. The astromech's noise dropped to a low whine. Ania watched tensely, wondering if AG-37 was putting himself at risk with this. As interesting as all this was, she didn't want him getting hurt over it. He was the oldest friend she had, maybe the best.

Then the assassin droid's photoreceptors lit up again, bright and steady. The other droid's did not, and R2-D2 continued to make mournful sounds. AG-37 removed the neural jack from his body and said, "As I suspected, this droid has suffered notable degradation in his processor. The majority of his memory engrams are damaged. Truthfully, it's a wonder he was able to recognize me at all."

Kyra stared at her battered friend. "Is Sleepy... Gone?"

"The scan I initiated was minimally invasive. Unfortunately, it triggered an electric surge in two key processing subunits that in turn caused a cascade shutdown of all systems. This was also beyond my ability to repair."

The girl looked like she was going to tip over. "So... he's dead?"

"I said that *I* cannot repair it." His photoreceptors pulsed for a moment, a sign of deep thought. "However, I do not believe all is lost. I do know of one facility which may be able to repair this unit while retaining all of its key memory engrams."

"So he's *not* dead?" asked Ania.

"Please, Ania, I've warned you about using organocentric terms to describe droid functions." AG-37's lower photoreceptor shifted to Kyra. "If you truly wish to repair this droid, then your best hope is a facility on Esseles run by the Massad Thrumble Memorial Foundation."

R2-D2 tweeted insistently but Skywalker said, "Never heard of them."

"They keep a very low profile, but there are the galaxy's leaders in cybertronic research and development. Their services are quite expensive, but I believe that's no longer a hazard."

"If they're galactic leaders," asked Sauk, "Why have none of us heard of them? Do they only work for rich clients? Private companies?"

“They are quite selective on the services they provide, but I assure you their research division is unparalleled. Further, I am certain they will help us. I have a familiarity with their founder.”

“What kind of familiarity?” asked Ania.

“In organocentric terms, you would call her...” AG-37’s photoreceptors pulsed thoughtfully. “My mother.”

Not even Skywalker had a response to that one. While everyone else tried to make sense of that, Kyra reached out to touch her droid’s stiff, scuffed face. “I want that. I want to go to Esseles.”

Beside her R2-D2 sounded off again, enthusiastically rocking back and forth. Skywalker shook his head, looked the three droids over, and told AG-37, “Why don’t you call ahead and make sure they’ll have us.”

“I would be happy to do so.”

“Okay, then.” He sighed and turned back to their half-forgotten treasure. “While you handle that, we’ve got spoils to divide. Let’s get to work.”

## Chapter Twelve

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It appeared that the empress kept her promises. The ship Marasiah Fel had provided for Morrigan Corde's use was a Kuati *Gladius*-class light freighter, small and quick but heavily armed too. The storage locker aboard contained all the tools Morrigan had once used as a field agent for Imperial intelligence, from surreptitious tracking devices to infra-red scanners, as well as the latest in concealable firearms and explosives, plus her long-time favorite: poisoned darts. The freighter's computer core contained a trove of data about suspected and confirmed Sith activity since Krayt's death. Combined with the knowledge Corde carried in her head, it gave her a good idea of where to start.

Morrigan would have almost felt good about this mission, had it not been for the company she had to keep.

"I still don't see why this is the best use of our time," Gunner Yage said as she dropped their ship out of hyperspace. It rocked as it fell toward the planet ahead, a sphere of mottled greens and browns.

"I've already explained that, daughter," Morrigan said from the co-pilot's seat. "We need to find Nial Qorlis. I don't expect him to be here on Abregado-Rae, but people who know him most certainly are."

"How do you know Qorlis can lead us to whatever's left of the Sith?"

"Because he was one of their best agents. Darth Maladi used him for all kinds of covert activity, and the empress' intel reports suggest that Qorlis is still alive and active. Like I said, he has allies here. They can point us in his direction."

As their ship rocked through Abregado-Rae's cloud layer, Gunner asked, "How do you know Qorlis is still working with the Sith?"

"Because I *know* Maladi. She doesn't throw away good tools until she has to. Qorlis is Force-sensitive, not strong enough to be a Sith, but enough to serve them better than the average spacer trash."

Gunner shook her head and muttered, "I still don't understand any of this."

"Just stay with me, daughter, and let me lead. You're here to be the empress' eyes and ears and keep me from doing anything treasonous."

"Oh, I get that. She wants someone who'll report everything you do- and who you probably won't stab in the back. But why did she turn *you* lose after all this time? Things have seemed so... calm."

Gunner knew about the kidnappings but not about Jedi losing touch with the Force. The empress had ruled that beyond her need-to-know. Morrigan sighed. "You've had some intel training, but not enough. You *should* know that history happens in the shadows."

"Thank you for the wisdom, Mother."

Gunner rolled her eyes as they broke the clouds and soared low over the planet's endless sprawl of flat marshland. The spaceport's towers could be seen on the horizon, a modest sight. Abregado-Rae was a Core world but it didn't look or act like one, which made it a popular stop for fringers who couldn't stand the pretensions of nearby planets. It was also a popular shadowport with plenty of illegal activity, and Morrigan had done her share of work here in the old days, before she'd become Nyna Calixte. She'd even come here with Kol, once upon a time.

Thinking about him did no good. She much preferred keeping Gunner on edge. "It's my fault, really," she said. "I should have been there for you when you were younger. Then you wouldn't have followed your father's path."

"I'd rather be a pilot than a spy," Gunner said as she brought them low over the spaceport town's low stone buildings and winding canals.

“Of course you would. If I were your age I’d *love* to have my own fighter squadron full of pretty soldier boys chasing after me, metaphorically *and* literally. But if you’re going to make your mark on the galaxy, there are better ways.”

“Dad’s made his mark just fine.”

“Rulf’s done well for himself,” Morrigan admitted. He’d been a rising captain when she, in her new identity as Nyna Calixte, had sought him out. Rulf had been a stepping-stone, a tool for advancement, and Gunner had been an accidental side-effect. Pushing them aside had been easier than leaving Kol and Cade; at the time she’d told herself that some things just got easier with practice. It hasn’t occurred to her until later that this wasn’t always a good thing.

Gunner maneuvered them over to their designated landing pad with all the smoothness of a TIE pilot. After she set the lowered the ship to rest and initiated cooldown procedures she finally looked her mother head-on. “Do you know exactly where we’re going?”

“I do.”

“Are we going in armed?”

“Always.”

Gunner, slightly mollified, rose from her seat. Morrigan followed and joined her at the equipment locker, where a nice collection of firearms awaited. A pair of BlasTech ARC-9965 rifles, the stormtrooper standard, were locked into racks on the wall. Morrigan instead went for the smaller arms. She handed Gunner a Czerka hold-out and a Merr-Sonn military-grade pistol and said, “One visible, on concealed.”

“I remember, mother,” Gunn said, then took a belt, strapped it on, and stuck the Merr-Sonn in its hip holster. The Czerka went inside her hip-length black jacket; Morrigan nodded approvingly and took two pistols for herself, then strapped a poisoned dart-launcher to her left wrist and finger-length vibro-blade at her right. She concealed them by shrugging on a loose brown coat. To passers-by the two women, both with light eyes and short-cut blond hair, would look like a mother and daughter team of smugglers or freighter pilots, which was close to the truth but also far away.



“One more question,” Gunner said before they moved for the exit. “Why Qorlis, of all the people we could be chasing?”

“Like I said, if the Sith are still working with anyone, it would be him.”

“Darth Maladi, you mean. Are you sure she’s even still alive?”

“I know that witch, Gunn. I was head of Imperial intelligence for a decade while *she* was Krayt’s spymaster. We worked trails around each other the entire time. She’s far too smart to have fallen into Wredd’s trap on the Floating World. She’s alive.”

Gunner looked at her mother carefully, then grunted. “Okay, then. Good to know this isn’t personal.”

She turned without waiting for a reply and exited the freighter. Morrigan stood there for a second before following her. *Well played*, she thought.

Morrigan hadn’t always been honest with herself, especially when she’d pretended to be Nyna Calixte, but she tried to be now. Her rivalry with Darth Maladi transcended the professional to become personal; the witch had manipulated her into a partnership with the Sith Morrigan would have never knowingly entered. She’d also gone behind Morrigan’s back to initiate the attack on the Jedi Temple at Ossus, killing Kol.

She had plenty of reasons to hate Maladi, but she also knew, objectively, that if the Sith were a part of this scheme, Maladi was at the heart of it. Reports said Darth Nihl had taken up Krayt’s mantle but Nihl wasn’t a subtle schemer. The same went for Darth Talon, Krayt’s attack dog. Only Maladi could have put something like this together.

After leaving and locking the ship, Morrigan and Gunner began to make their way through the spaceport. The historic center of the city was called the Old Patch, where low stone buildings were crammed together too tight for speeders to pass through. Pedestrians maneuvered down narrow alleys and across bridges that arched over the city’s canals, where more passengers were pushed along in by gondolas steered by Abregado-Rae’s lanky, white-furred natives. The Old Patch hadn’t changed at all since the days she’d come here

with Kol, and she felt shadowed by long-off memories as she guided Gunner to their destination.

The Clear Waters was the largest gambling house, cantina, and entertainment complex in the Old Patch, and while its burgeoning structure was cantilevered over a stretch of canal, the name was far from appropriate. As soon as Morrigan and Gunner walked inside they were assaulted by the reek of narcotic-smoke from a dozen different recreational drugs, and as they made their way across the casino floor their boots nearly stuck to the encrusted filth on the tiles.

"What a charming place," Gunner muttered as they passed a Herglic, massive even for its species' standards, working a two slot machines at once with a glazed look on its face. At a nearby stage, a pair of barely-clad Zeltrons were performing for a mixed group of humans and Gados.

"Not everyone lives for martial order and discipline," Morrigan reminded. This place hadn't changed much since she'd been here with Kol, and she tried to avoid the tug of nostalgia.

"They could at least mop the floors now and then. Who are we trying to find, Mother?"

"Don't call me that, not here," Morrigan said. "Call me 'boss' or nothing, understood?"

Gunner nodded. She'd probably stick with nothing.

Morrigan led the way to the security office, where an imposing and very ugly Houk glowered at them from behind the counter. Morrigan smiled tightly and said, "Good afternoon. I'd like to talk with management."

"What about?" grunted the Houk.

"I'm afraid it's really a private matter, for Paxo Rovless' ears only."

"Paxo don't talk to nobody without inviting them first."

"Oh, I think he'll make an exception for me." She winked and added, "We're old friends."

"Get out of here, old hag. I ain't bothering the boss about *schutta* like you."

"I'm serious." She added ice to her tone. The *schutta* rolled off her back but the hag remark stung. "He knows me. Tell him Morrigan Corde's here. I'll wait."

"I said get *out*. If you won't quit fooling around I'll *make* you leave."

The Houk came around the counter. Gunner edged back, one hand on her pistol, but Morrigan made a gesture to stay her. The Houk came down on Morrigan, reached for her with a fist as big as her head. Morrigan flicked up her left wrist and soundlessly shot a dart straight into the leathery wattles of the Houk's neck. The bouncer grunted, pulled out the tiny metal projectile with his oversized hand, and stared at it.

"What did you do to me?" His voice was thick with fear now. "What's in this?"

"Nothing. That one's empty," Morrigan said. Her wrist was still angled at his neck. "Next one's not. Now tell Paxo I'm here and I won't tell him how brainless his employees are."

The Houk glared murder at her, but she knew he wouldn't do more than that. With one more grunt, the big alien stomped around the counter and disappeared through a back door. Morrigan took a wide look around; the casino was going about its business, the little altercation unnoticed.

"Was that necessary?" Gunner hissed.

Morrigan rolled her eyes. "Please. A soldier should know something about dominance displays."

"You look like you enjoyed it."

There was no reason to lie. "I've been locked in a room for almost two years. It's been a long time since I've done the kind of work I'm good at."

"You mean bully and manipulate people?"

For a soldier on duty Gunner was acting very unprofessional. "We can talk about this later. Keep your eye on the job."

Sullenly, her daughter reminded, "My job is watching *you*."

They waited for only a few minutes before they got their response. The surly Houk was gone; this time a well-dressed Gados appeared and showed them through the back door. They were escorted down a few narrow hallways, into Paxo Rovless' office. He'd changed the interior décor up since Morrigan had last been here, but he still had the floor-to-ceiling windows that looked out on the canal. Paxo was on his feet, waiting for them, a tall Nimbanel with grey skin and a jowled face. Back when Morrigan and Kol had first come

here, a lifetime ago, he'd been a bold young crime boss. He no longer looked bold or young but he was still running the Clear Waters, which gave him longevity beyond a lot of criminals.

"Morrigan karking Corde," Paxo said after his Gados aide left the room. When he came close to shake her hand she could mark the gray in his whiskers and bags under his eyes, but his voice was as strong as ever. "Who's the assistant?"

"This is Gunn, my lieutenant," she said. Gunner kept her expression blank as she shook Paxo's hand.

The Nimbanel retreated across the office, toward the window. He gestured for Morrigan and Gunner to sit down on the sofa and took the adjacent plush chair for himself. "You know," he said conversationally, "I heard you were dead. I also heard you'd retired, changed your name, or been drummed out of Imp intelligence and started a spice ring."

"I'm glad to hear I've been keeping busy."

"I'd like to get some clarification before we start talking. I'm sure you didn't come here just to say hello." Paxo's tone got serious. "Who are you working for, Corde?"

With a polite smile Morrigan said, "I've been reactivated. My old employers thought I'd be useful."

"Well, what's interesting." Paxo leaned back in his hair chair. Small eyes darted to Gunner, who sat stony-faced and unresponsive. "And what do you think I can do for you?"

"Nial Qorlis. I want him."

Paxo blinked. "Stang. It's been a long time I've heard from him..."

"Don't lie to me, Paxo. I know your tells." Morrigan leaned forward. "The empress wants him. Badly. And no, you don't get to know why. I've got a credit account and I've been authorized to pay you as I see fit for services rendered."

Paxo's face scrunched in thought. A crime boss who sold out too many allies to the government usually ended up dead; he was calculating how expendable Qorlis was to him, and how much his head should cost.

"Seventy-five," Paxo said. Thousand, of course.

"Forty."

Paxo's jowls pulled back, revealing sharp teeth. "You really going to haggle me like that?"

“What kind of information are you offering? How specific?”

“I know Qorlis has a base of operations off the Hydian. He set up shop there towards the end of the war and he’s been there since.”

“When did you last talk to him?”

Paxo thought a second. “Three months ago. He asked me to set him up with some spice-runners.”

That could mean nothing; it could be a lead. “Give me the names of spice-runners and I’ll throw in an extra five thousand.”

“Ten.”

“Seven, and that’s final. Give me the call log too. Contents and metadata. I can use that to trace his location down to the square kilometer.”

Paxo hesitated. “The stuff in that call ain’t exactly legal.”

“We’re not interested in prosecuting you, Paxo. All we want is Qorlis.”

“Still. I’ll give you the metadata, not the call itself. Like you said, that’ll be enough to find his location, right?”

That was right, assuming he gave metadata for the correct call and wasn’t trying to stiff her. “Three thousand extra for the data.”

“Good enough. That puts us at forty thousand. Bump my pay up to fifty and we can part ways happy.”

“Agreed,” Morrigan said, then lifted a finger. “Twenty now. Thirty after I have Qorlis in hand.”

Paxo growled. “Half now, half later. At least give me an even split.”

An extra five thousand wasn’t worth quibbling over. After all, it was the empress’ money. “We have a deal. Give me that data and I’ll give you account access.”

It took them a few minutes to finalize the exchange. Paxo disappeared for a few more, then returned with a datacard containing the information from his last call to Qorlis. It placed the smuggler and sometime Sith agent on Oranessan, out on the Hydian. She’d never been there but the name evoked a ravaged post-industrial waste. As good a place as any to lay low on, perhaps for a mere criminal, perhaps for the Sith themselves. They’d have to approach with caution.

In return, Morrigan gave Paxo a card containing access to an account with twenty-five thousand credits. "I'll deposit the other half once we have Qorlis," she told him.

"I'll hold you to that, Corde."

"The Empire always keeps it promises," she smiled coolly.

"That so? I thought there's some triumvirate federation going on now."

"With an empress calling the shots, yes." Morrigan stuck Paxo's datacard in her jacket. "It's a pleasure doing business with you."

"The real pleasure'll be when I get the second half of my payment," the Nimbanel grunted. "When you nab Qorlis... keep my name out of it, you hear?"

"I don't think you have to worry about that. Goodbye, Paxo."

They left without shaking hands. The Gados lieutenant was outside the office door, and it escorted the two women back to the casino floor. Morrigan led Gunner back to the exit and into the Old Patch's narrow streets, all the while watching carefully for tails. She had a soft spot for Paxo, but she wasn't stupid enough to trust him.

As they walked back toward the spaceport, Gunner muttered, "I don't think we're being followed."

"I'm glad you're paying attention."

"I'm not an *idiot* mother."

"Just a soldier."

"Exactly," she said, with faint pride. "Is our business done here?"

"Yes, we can make way for Oranessian now. It's out in the Grumani Sector, near Darkknell. That should give us, oh, two or three days of quality time before we get there."

Gunner's response was a noncommittal grunt.

"Forgive me my enthusiasm," Morrigan added. "Even a woman like me wants to spend time with the only child she has left."

Gunner didn't retort, didn't grunt. Her stony expression wilted a little and she kept walking. Morrigan had gotten through to her, just a little bit. Ironical that it had been a lie.

The rest of the galaxy thought Cade Skywalker was dead. Morrigan would have too, had she not received a single call

from her son just days after the death of Darth Krayt. It had come on an encrypted personal frequency she'd taught him to use, one she'd originally shared with Kol decades ago. In his message he'd said that he was alive, that his destiny was complete, and he planned on laying low and living free now on. He'd ended by saying that he forgave her but had stopped short of saying he loved her. Not that she'd expected, or earned, those words.

That was all she'd heard from him in the past two years. She could still use Kol's old encrypted frequency to call him, and maybe she even would, now that she was free from house arrest. Currently, though, she hoped Cade stayed a stranger as long as he could, for his sake. If she had to speak to him again, it would mean things had spiraled out of control.

Eli's earliest memories were of green things. Though his family was Corellian he had no memory of that world; as a small child he'd accompanied his father on Ossus and Duro after they'd been remade with Yuuzhan Vong bioforming into verdant worlds. But he remembered, too, the nightmare perversions that had turned those paradises into hells of carnivorous plants, choking vines, and gentle creatures turned to savage thorny monsters by their yorik coral implants. The Jedi might revere natural things but his Sith masters had taught him, time and again, that nature was a savage meant to be tamed. Thus they fashioned their homes from steel and rock.

Despite their teachings, a part of Eli revolted from Oranessian. Located on a major hyperspace route but sparsely inhabited, the world had been gutted of valuable resources centuries ago. With nothing left to mine its population had dropped precipitously in the past several centuries, leaving the detritus of the planet's exploitation. As their *Nemesis*-class patrol ship dropped into the lower atmosphere, Eli and Talon could see vast fields of rusted metal scrap, the ruins of refineries collapsed and overgrown with sickly foliage, and strip-mined craters large enough to fit a star destroyer inside.

They did not find any sign of current habitation until they neared Oranessian's only spaceport, which was larger and

busier than Eli had expected. As he set their ship down on the assigned landing pad Talon said, "This world is mostly a shadowport nowadays. The streets will be filled with predators."

"I can take care of myself," Eli said as he left the pilot's chair.

"I know," said Talon. "We did not come here to get in fights with vermin. We will find Nial Qorlis and capture him alive. Anything else is a distraction."

Eli nodded, but before he left the ship he made sure he was armed with his lightsaber and a blaster pistol. Likewise he threw a plasteel armor vest across his chest before covering it with a loose black cloak. Talon simply wrapped her sinuously exposed red-and-black form in a dark cape, taking no such precautions, but Eli knew she didn't need to. The Force was all the armor she ever needed.

As they stepped out into the spaceport he felt excited. He fancied katarns and panthacs must feel this way when on the scent of elusive prey. It hadn't been easy to get to Oranessan; he and Talon had retraced the route of the captured pod to Averam, near Eriadu. Once there Eli had gone aboard the space station orbiting Averam and accessed its flight control logs. Using that he'd been able to identify the old Corellian bulk transport ship that had stopped at Averam to refuel, and on the way out detached the pod from its starboard cargo hold and sent it flying on its final trip to the Mustafar system. Using the registry information for the cargo ship, he'd been able to trace it back to its owner, one Nial Qorlis, based on Oranessan. When they'd relayed that information to Saijo, Darth Nihl had confirmed that Qorlis was a favorite agent of Darth Maladi's.

The mission on Averam had been a stealthy one, complicated but bloodless. Eli had had to erase the memory of several guards and blur a few security holo-cams using techniques Talon had taught him, but it had not been a difficult mission overall. He knew that might change soon; Nihl had made it quite clear that Maladi was to be treated as a threat, not an ally, and so were her minions.

Eli looked forward to the challenge. He wanted to make the Force sing through his body as it did during training



exercises battling remotes. Its dark melody would be all the sweeter for the higher stakes.

Given the wastelands they'd passed on the way here, Eli was surprised Oranessan's port was in as good a shape as it was. Despite the pollution in the air, the streets were clean, the building-faces tidy, and most of the pedestrians did *not* look ready to pull him into an alley and stab him, though a fair amount did.

"This is better than I expected from a shadowport," Eli whispered.

Talon, hood pulled low to obscure her face, said, "Focus on the task at hand. We have registry information for Nial Qorlis. It might be a legitimate address or it might not. We should be prepared for anything."

She was right. Eli tried to sense of the lives around him with the Force, tried to locate anyone with an especially strong presence. Nihl had said that the Sith had given Qorlis some Force training, but that he'd been too weak to actively join their numbers. He felt no clear minds besides Talon's, but that could mean anything.

They eventually neared the address of the company to which Qorlis' ship was registered. It was located on the eight floor of an ugly ferrocrete tower block. Eli had learned to scout any building before going inside and he did just that, circling the grounds to note the two turbolift shifts on the north and side wings and the three stairwells. He noted the security desk at the main entrance and the bug-eye holocams, and the landspeeders parked outside.

"Go inside and try to locate him," Talon told Eli. "I will wait out here."

Eli did as he was told. He went in through the main gate, using the Force to blur the mind of the security guard as he passed through. Once beyond, it was easy to consult the directory of companies inside the building, and from there he went to the north lift and rode it up the eight floor.

The plain hallway stretched before him, the door to Qorlis' office on the far end. Nothing felt right about this. It was all too simple, too mundane. The Force gave him no hint that something important was about to happen. He reached out to

Darth Talon, felt her waiting outside the tower block, then stepped forward.

Eli came before the door and tried to decide what to do. If he charged in with his saber blazing he'd take those inside by surprise but also play his hand. If Qorlis was elsewhere, he'd be alerted that the Sith were after him and go into hiding. With no red and black markings on his face, Eli could pretend he was something else; it was likely why Talon had sent him up here alone.

So he rapped his knuckles on the door and waited. He heard some shifting from inside, but no one opened the door or responded. He knocked against and reached out with the Force, but felt nothing certain inside, only a faint activity that could have been any number of people.

Eli put a hand on the door and tried to slide it open, but it didn't budge. He knocked one final time and still got no reply. He reached inside his cloak, drew his lightsaber, then made sure it was well-hidden inside his voluminous sleeve before using the Force to push the door aside.

Eli received a faceful of laserfire. He ignited the lightsaber and brought it up, searing through part of his cloak before batting aside the blasts. Through the door he saw an office space with desks and shelves, but standing in the middle were two battle droids, silver and skeletal with blasters in place of either hand. Their fire was deadly, and soon the wall around the doorframe was pocked with dozens of scorch-marks from reflects blasts.

Eli had no idea what was going on, but retreat was no option. He called on the Force to knock the droids backward; they tipped but staggered their legs to keep from falling, and kept shooting all the while. Using another tack, Eli tipped one heavy desk toward the left droid, forcing it to sidestep to avoid. Eli charged through the doorway at the right droid and bisected it with a horizontal swipe through the hip. The droid's upper half kept pumping out laserfire, scorching the ceiling as the torso fell, and Eli barely sidestepped them before severing both arms from the body with a pair of low swipes.

There was no time to feel satisfied; a blast from the second droid too his left arm, sending hideous pain through his body.

Pain made him angry; anger made him strong. He charged the second droid, ducked beneath two blasts, then came up with a strong vertical swing that severed the machine from groin to head. The droid fell in two tall halves and was still.

Just when Eli thought it was over, more laserfire came at him. The fire coming out of the side room was unsteady and erratic; it had to have come from a living hand. Deflecting the blasts easily, Eli stepped through the side door and found a single human male, overweight and middle-aged, crouched behind his desk with elbows on the desktop and blaster pistol aimed at the approaching Sith. His hands shook and he had terror in his eyes.

Eli had no time to play. He used the Force to slam the man into the back wall and wrench his blaster away. He bounded over the desk and came down on top of the man, lightsaber-tip buzzing at the edges of the neck. The man winced and tried to twist away; though his arm was still in awful pain, Eli gripped the man's face with his left hand and held the lightsaber-tip in front of his face. Its red-white gleamed on his prickled sweat.

"Are you Nial Qorlis?" Eli growled. He thought Maladi's agent would put up a better fight than this.

The fat man tried to wag his head. Eli loosened his grip enough for the man to say, "N-Not him... He just left... S-s-said to stall anyone who came..."

Eli sensed his terror in the Force, and his honesty. "Where did Qorlis go?"

"G-gone..." the man stuttered. "Getting off this r-rock..."

As the words came out Talon touched him urgently in the Force. She'd spotted Qorlis and she was already in pursuit. He had to clean up there fast and come after her.

Eli growled; this was too much of a mess already, and unlike on Vorzyd V, no one else was there to clean it up for him. He looked into the fearful eyes of the man below him and knew this, at least, was one loose end he could tidy. He could have used his blade; instead he used the Force to give his neck a single sharp twist that popped vertebrae and severed his spin. The head lolled to one side; the rest of the limp body didn't move at all.

As far as covering their tracks, it would have to do. Eli rose and sprinted out of the room, down to the south side stairwell. He bounded down as fast as he could, taking a flight at a time, using the Force to soften his impact and strengthen his leaps. When he burst out the emergency exit Eli saw a speeder bike emerging from the motor pool, a black-robed body perched atop.

He alerted Talon to his presence and sprinted to meet her. She swooped down, allowing him to Force-leap up and grab onto her waist. Once he was secure she spared no velocity, pushing the civilian-model bike to maximum speed as they soared over the spaceport's lower rooftops, cutting a straight line for the spaceport.

"He has a landspeeder," Talon yelled over the wind. "We should be able to get there first and cut him off."

"How did he spot us?" Eli asked. Rushing air blew the hoods off both their faces. "I blurred all the security cams!"

"It doesn't matter," said Talon. And she was right; it didn't.

Eli had no idea what Qorlis' speeder looked like but he scanned the streets below for any vehicle driving fast and erratically. He spotted nothing and could feel Talon's frustration mount.

"Did we lose him?" Eli called.

Talon's response was to jerk their bike onto another course. She dipped low over the city streets, summoning calls and beeping horns from the traffic below. She wrenched the bike down two alleys before stopping it above a yellow landspeeder sitting empty above the pavement.

"Is that it?" asked Eli. "Did he ditch it?"

"To throw us off his trail," Talon said, and pulled them out of the alley. She set course immediately for the spaceport, and Eli hoped the man hadn't had a second ride waiting to carry him the rest of the way. If he had, he'd be on his way out already.

When they reached the port complex Talon pulled them as high as the bike's repulsors would allow. It gave them a view of most of the landing pads, and Eli scanned for the Corellian ship that had appeared over Averam. His eyes lit with recognition on its high metal bulk just as he heard the sounds of its repulsors firing to full take-off mode.

“There!” Eli cried, jabbing his right hand at the ship.

Talon dove at the freighter even as it started taking off. This was a civilian bike with no weapons attached, and their small arms could do nothing against a ship this big. Wrapping his wounded left arm as tightly around her waist as he could, Eli gripped his lightsaber in his right hand and ignited it.

“Pass on its left!” Eli called. “I’ll try and take out the engines!”

Talon ignored him. As the freighter started rising and fired its engines she ducked beneath it. One hand lashed out briefly, but Eli saw no weapon in it, no bolt flying toward the ship. Instead Talon resumed her tight grip on the bike’s controls and swung them hard away from the freighter just as its thrusters kicked to full and fried the place where they’d just been.

Eli snarled a curse as their bike soared in one direction, the transport another. It was soon beyond their possible altitude, soaring into the pollution-gray sky. Qorlis could run anywhere he pleased now, and they’d be powerless to stop him.

Eli’s throat tightened as he said, “I’m sorry, Master... So sorry...”

Talon, though, wheeled them around toward their own ship, parked on the other end of the spaceport. Curtly she said, “You could not have damaged its active engines without destroying us too. Thankfully, I was prepared.”

“What do you mean, Master?”

“I’ve placed a tracking device on its outer hull.”

“You mean we can chase him?”

“Indeed.” Talon dropped the speeder bike onto the landing pad right next to their vessel. She jumped off its back nimbly. Eli, left side of his body still aching, removed himself more slowly.

He could feel no scorn from his master for his failure, only a cool impatience. Talon said, “We’ve leave immediately. I don’t think we’ll be welcome here long.”

“Yes, Master.”

“Did you clear out his office?”

“No eyewitnesses, Master.”

“Good enough.” Talon snapped her fingers, and the landing ramp swung down. “Come. You have not failed yet, apprentice. Don’t fail now by giving in.”

She was right; she was always right. Humbly, Eli followed his teacher into their ship.

## Chapter Thirteen

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Azlyn felt strange, being out of the red. Since Had Abbadon she'd been unable to survive without help from the cybernetic implants that processed air in place of her ravaged lungs. Building on Nat Skywalker's design, Hogrum Chalk had developed equipment that could be combined with a modified set of Imperial Knight armor, allowing her not just to survive but to do all the tasks required of someone in her position. Since then the scarlet armor had become her constant garment. Even when sleeping she removed the arm- and leg-plates, but the red breastpiece that breathed for her was as necessary as flesh.

The undercover mission to Paqualis III required something different, and before leaving Coruscant she'd received a rushed refitting from Master Chalk. Her breastpiece had been repainted with metal-gray colors. Lighter armor was attached to her limbs and waist. Were it not for the bulk of the breathing apparatus it almost looked like the lightweight plating she'd worn while acting as a free-range scout, before Had Abbadon.

Armor wasn't everything. She still heard the faint mechanical rasp that came with every breath and every mirror showed the scars still lacing her face. She'd been ambivalent about her position among the Imperial Knights, but now that she was pretending to be something else, Azlyn felt displaced.

If her companions were having as much difficulty with the undercover mission, they didn't show it. Shado Vao still walked with a Jedi's alertness and subtle dignity, but the

rough spacer's garb- long coat, high boots, blaster pistols slung on either hip- made him seem authentic enough. Anj Dahl, with her messy hair, sleeveless vest, tight trousers and hip-mounted double-blasters, didn't look the least bit military.

They let Anj lead them through the streets of Paqualis III's second-largest city. They'd left their transport, an aged and refitted Corellian disc called *Scarlet Star*, back at the spaceport, and according to Anj it was about a half-hour walk to the location where they were set to meet their Mandalorian contacts. It was a place both Anj and Hondo Karr has used once during a Rogue Squadron op, she'd explained; a common ground both were familiar with.

Paqualis III was a typical Mid Rim commerce planet, less refined than Core worlds but not shabby and lawless like many on the Outer Rim. Humans and dozens of other species mixed freely in the streets. Legals and illegals rubbed shoulders just as easily. It was a place where a Twi'lek and two humans- one with bulky armor and a face full of scars- didn't attract more than an extra glance. Still, Azlyn felt anxious, and she couldn't tell if it was the Force nagging her or just her own anxieties. She hadn't been able to say goodbye to Ganner before being rushed off on this mission, and she prayed she wouldn't end up regretting that more than she already did.

When they finally reached their destination, Azlyn totally missed it. So did Shado; only Anj knew to sidestep into a narrow alley, then walk to the far end to access the entrance to an old lift. Shado and Azlyn awkwardly squeezed into the metal box with her, and all three were lifted via an old-fashioned cable pulley, up ten storeys. The lift's rear doors opened on a gray ferrocrete hallway, but there was light and faint noise from the other end. Anj led them unerringly down it, and Azlyn was surprised to find a four-armed Xexto waiting behind the counter on the other end.

"Do you have a reservation, gentles?" asked the Xexto.

"Yes," said Anj. "Under the name 'Rogue One.'"

The Xexto checked his datapad. "Indeed. Some of your party had already arrived. You are in room Grek." He waved two arms to his right. "Down this hallway, four doors to your



right.” With his other two arms he held out sheets of laminated flimsi. Food menus, Azlyn realized. “Once you’ve made your selection, please inform us via the intercom. Your meals will be delivered in a timely manner.”

“I know, I’ve been here before,” Anj smiled and took the menus. She gestured for Shado and Azlyn to follow, then walked briskly down the hall.

“I wasn’t expecting a restaurant,” said Shado.

“Very selective, very private,” Anj whispered back. “Food’s pretty good too.”

“If it works, it works,” muttered Azlyn.

When they reached the fourth door on the right, Anj paused. She handed off the menus to Shado, raised one hand to knock on the door, and placed the other on the butt of her holstered pistol.

She knocked twice. A voice, muffled by the door, called back, “What is it?”

“We’re offering the daily special,” Anj replied.

“We’ve already been serviced.”

“This one is special. Three samples, fresh from Coruscant.”

After a moment, the door slid open. Anj tensed, then released her blaster and grinned. The man facing her had a blue eyes in a broad face, crowned by blond hair that was short but messy. His smile seemed warm and honest, but those eyes looked dangerous.

“Stang,” the man grinned. “Never thought I’d see you again.”

“I was going to say the same to you,” Anj said. “Can we come in?”

“Of course,” the blonde said. He stepped back, allowed the newcomers to enter the room. It was a simple cube with grey unadorned walls and a low table around which two beings were already sitting. Both were human: one woman with short auburn hair, the other an older man with a wide body and thick gray beard.

As everyone else sat down as well, Anj said, “These are Shado Vao and Azlyn Rae. Jedi and Imperial Knight, respectively.”

“And you Alliance,” said the auburn-haired woman. “Rouge Leader, isn’t it? It’s been a while.”

"I really has. Shado, Azlyn, these are Hondo Karr, formerly Rogue Squadron-" she gestured to the blonde man. "And his wife, Tes Vevec. I'm afraid I don't know guest number three."

"Jind Skirata," the bearded man volunteered.

"Are you all Mandalorian?" asked Shado. Like the team from Coruscant, they'd all dressed in nondescript spacer's clothes.

"All born and raised," Karr said with pride. "And looking to set things right on Mandalore."

"Hondo said you've got a gift for us," said Skirata.

"You can call it that. It's more of an offer," said Anj. "I'm hoping we can do things for each other."

"I'd like to hear a little more about you first," Shado told the Mandalorians. "I understand you're enemies of Yaga Auch's."

"He killed our old Mandalore, Chernan Ordo, at Botajef," Karr said. "I was there. I saw it. He killed Ordo and a whole squad of his Mando brothers, then ordered us to pull out so the Imps could have the planet. Lots more Mandos bought it during the retreat, and he made sure Ordo's loyalists took the brunt of the damage. I only made it out because I ditched *beskar* for stormtrooper armor. Tes' *buir* wasn't so lucky."

"Auchs tried to shift the blame," Vevec said, scowling. "He told me Hondo murdered my father and implied he killed Ordo too. He tried to get me to kill my husband."

It sounded like good grounds for a grudge. Azlyn looked at the third man. "What about you?"

"I wasn't at Botajef but I've got plenty reasons to want a new Mandalore," Skirata said gruffly.

"His clan's got a long unhappy history with the Auch's family," Karr added. "Too long to explain. The point is, we're working with other Mandos who want a leadership change."

"I take it," said Azlyn, "This is more complicated than just killing Auch's."

"We're not savages, *aruetti*," Skirata said. "If we shoot Auch's tomorrow it could start a big messy war. Auch's uncle Gevern was Mandalore long time back, and when he disappeared it started a storm of *osik* like you wouldn't

believe. What we want to expose the *shabuir* and shame him. We want proof that he killed Ordo, and we want to know on whose orders.”

“The Alliance has been wondering about that too, since Botajef,” Anj added.

“We’ve been laying low, gathering allies and intel and *not* letting Auchs know we’re a threat,” added Karr. “We’ve learned a lot about his organization, his best lieutenants. We know he brought in some outside help to consolidate his rule but we’re still not exactly sure what kind. There’s some reports Black Sun was involved, but we’ve had a couple chats with mid-level operatives who deny it.” He shrugged. “Sorry, but Auchs’ benefactors are still a mystery.”

Azlyn recalled the briefing data package *Scarlet Star* had received as they were inbound for Paqualis III. She said, “Imperial Intelligence believes Auchs was working on orders from the Sith. Possibly Krayt’s spymaster, Darth Maladi, who hasn’t been accounted for since the war ended.” She hoped they didn’t ask for sources or specifics; the briefing hadn’t contained them.

Skirata made a growling noise in his throat. “The Auchs have a long history with the Sith. *Long* history.”

“We know,” said Shado. “And we think our current problem may be another collaboration between them.”

“Well, all right then,” said Karr. “What kind of problems are we talking about?”

“I’ll show you.” Anj said.

She took a small portable holo-projector from his pocket and set it on the middle of the table; despite Karr’s objection before, it was clear of any food or dishes. All six of them watched as she inserted a datacard and played the recording from the security camera on Nubia. Anj zoomed and paused at appropriate moments to point out where the Jedi Kel Yobis was ambushed and captured by men in Mandalorian T-visor helmets.

“An Imperial Knight was also kidnapped, from Belgaroth,” Azlyn added. “He was taken to the same place as Knight Yobis and we assume the Mandalorians did that too.”

“Five of the knights from both our orders have disappeared over the past year,” Shado added. “Location and time

estimates are included in another file on that card. They may not all be connected, but I suspect at least *some* are.”

“That’s still not much to go by.” Vevac sounded disappointed. “The resolution’s too low to tell if those are even real Mandos.”

“We found a little more,” Anj said, and tapped the projector’s controls. “I hope this can be useful.”

A flat image appeared, an excerpt of the data-log from Nubia’s flight control detailing the MandalMotors ship they suspected of being used by the kidnappers. Azlyn watched the Mandalorians narrow their eyes and sink into thought.

“We know it’s a new model ship that hasn’t entered foreign or resale markets yet,” Anj said. “We were hoping you could look into that design or transponder signature. We know they smugglers and illegals have all kinds of ways of faking those signatures-”

“But most just cycle through a handful of fake IDs. Three or four at most,” Karr said. “We’ll see how this matches with our data on Auch’s lieutenants.”

“Thank you, Hondo.” Anj removed the datacard from the projected and handed it to him. “The empress is considering these kidnappings an act of aggression against the entire Galactic Federation. She’s put a very high priority on finding those responsible.”

“I imagine she would,” Skirata said. “So let’s say we *do* find out who kidnapped your *jeti*. What then?”

“Then we move against them and get proof who hired them. And maybe get proof of who hired Auch’s to kill Chernan Ordo on Botajef,” Anj said. “We could all end up winners in this.”

Except, Azlyn thought, for Ganner and Yobis. They might never touch the Force again.

“If we get her what she needs,” Skirata mused, “I hope your empress will be suitably grateful.”

“Meaning what exactly?” asked Azlyn.

“I’m just trying to measure how much support we can expect from you people down the road. Favors for favors.”

“Do you really want the triumvirate ousting Auch’s for you?” asked Shado. “I understand you people aren’t fond of foreigners getting involved in your affairs.”

"We're not," said Vevec. "But right now, we need all the help we can get."

"I don't have the authority to promise anything," Anj shook her head. "I'm here to find the people who kidnapped our knights. That's it."

"Fine by me," said Karr. "Our leader hasn't authorized us to do anything more than that yet. We're not here for long-term planning."

"Good," Anj said, and glanced at Skirata. "If the triumvirate *is* interested in a more lasting partnership, we'll ask to contact your leader and talk to him directly."

"Her," Skirata corrected. "But alright. That works for now."

Karr rolled the datacard between fingers, looked around the table, and asked, "Are we done for the moment?"

"I guess we are," said Anj.

"Good." Karr slapped his other palm on the table. "We're here. Might as well order a feast and put it on the empress' tab. I figure she's got the budget for it."

Anj smiled easily. "I don't think she'd mind. As long as you're worth the investment in the end."

Karr grinned back. Azlyn got the impression he was the kind of man who could be your most valuable friend or most dangerous enemy, and nothing in between. "Pass those menus, Rogue Leader, then start telling me about the old pilots."

"They're not all around anymore." Her smile wilted. "We lost a lot at Coruscant at the end of the war. Ronto, Andurgo, Cheevo, Plocum..."

"I figured as much," Karr got serious too. "All the more reason to remember them."

"*Vode an*," muttered Vevec.

Azlyn didn't know much *Mando'a*, but she knew that one. Brothers all. People at this table came from all different factions, clans, and orders, but they'd been comrades in arms once. And, she supposed, they were comrades still.

They'd passed their key information along to their Mandalorian contacts, and after a filling meal Hondo Karr's team had lifted off, but they'd been told not to return to

Coruscant until the mission was over. Therefore Shado, Azlyn, and Anj were set to a long spell of waiting.

Because there was no reason not to, they kept their ship parked in its berth on Paqualis III. Anj frequently left the spaceport and went into the surrounding city, not to gather intel or patrol for threats but simply to entertain herself. Shado envied the pilot her aplomb; he'd been on constant edge since Stazi gave them this mission, and he knew Azlyn had been too.

One evening, once Anj had gone out to 'scout some cantinas,' as she put it, Shado and Azlyn attempted to alleviate their stress by sparring in *Scarlet Star's* spacious cargo hold. Wearing only the breastplate that attached to her respirator equipment, Azlyn was almost as agile as he'd remembered. Her all-white blade moved fast to parry blows from either end of Shado's double-bladed lightsaber, and when she couldn't parry she skipped back or jumped high, even snapped her whole body backward to evade a thrust at her sternum, carefully controlled by Shado to avoid actually hurting her.

After only ten minutes they were both slick with sweat and high with adrenaline. Azlyn was actually *smiling* again, and the sight of it took Shado a long way back; before she had the cybernetic respirator and the scars, before she became an Imperial Knight, before the Jedi purge and that awful last night on Ossus. Before they'd lost Cade twice over.

Her smile faded, and he knew she, too, had let her mind drift back to innocence lost. He deactivated the lower blade of his lightsaber, tipped the remaining one toward her, and asked, "Would you like to try something different?"

"That's okay, Shado." She shut hers off entirely. "That was good enough."

"All right." He let his second blade retract. "You did very well, though. I could feel it. You were reacting on pure instinct, letting the Force guide you. It was just..."

He faltered. She finished for him. "Just like at the Jedi academy. I know." She looked at her hand; a new lightsaber for a new life. "I try to incorporate teachings from both schools the best I can."

“Is that why you’ve been coming to see Master Tuum so often?”

Her smile was embarrassed, her shrug evasive. “I’m just glad he’s alive, after all we’ve been through. He’s helped me get through everything.”

Shado nodded. “Ganner too, I imagine.”

Azlyn closed her eyes and closed herself off from the Force. Her hand tightened to a fist around her saber. Apparently it had been the wrong thing to say.

“I’m sorry,” Shado said. “I honestly wasn’t trying to pry.”

“Pry about what?”

He blinked. “About... any of it.” Her relationship with Ganner. What was going on in that sealed-up medical ward.

She walked over to the bench at the side of the hold and sat down. Rolling her lightsaber between her palms she said, “Come here, Shado.”

She wanted to unburden but remained closed up in the Force. He sat on the bench next to her and asked, “What is it?”

“Ganner,” she said. “And Kel Yobis. You don’t know what’s happened to them, do you?”

“No.”

“I promised Master Sinde I wouldn’t tell. I gave him my word as an Imperial Knight. I meant it, too. I’ve been... tempted to go back to the Jedi. But I think I should stay with the Imperials, for a lot of reasons. So I meant to keep my promise to Master Sinde.”

“All right.” He knew she was about to break it.

Azlyn sucked in breath, released it. “Shado, they’ve lost the Force. Ganner and Yobis both.”

“I... I’m not sure what you mean.”

“They’re still *in* the Force. I can feel them, very vaguely, but it’s like they’re... distorted. Different. Like you’re looking at something underwater, maybe. That’s just me. They can’t feel it at all. They can’t touch it, they can’t hear it. It’s like they’re totally deaf.”

Shado felt a chill run down his body. The idea of being totally severed from the Force induced primal terror in any Jedi. They all knew it had happened before, but only long ago and very rarely. It had always been a hypothetical fear.

He struggled to make sense of it. "When we found them on Talus, they had the Force."

"I know. They lost it at about the same time, almost a week after we recovered them."

"That makes no sense. They've been in the medical ward, under observation the whole time."

"I know."

"How did they lose the Force? Did the medics-"

"I don't know, Shado. They didn't know either, not when I talked to them. That was the morning it all happened. Maybe they've found out something else in the past few days, I can't say. I shouldn't have heard about this at all." Her lips canted wryly. "I think Master Sinde let me see Ganner because he figured I'd force or sneak my way inside if he didn't. I shouldn't have betrayed his trust."

If something this was happening, Shado knew it wasn't just the empress keeping secrets. Grand Master K'Kruhk must know also, and also wanted to keep it under wraps. If his got out it could threaten the positions of both their orders. Anj was almost certainly unaware; maybe they were even hiding it from Stazi.

"Thank you for telling me, Azlyn," he said.

She nodded dully. "I just... thought you should know what the stakes are."

Shado didn't; neither did she. Only Ganner and Yobis really understood what had been done to them, even if they didn't know why or how. His heart ached for them, and beneath the ache there was dread. The primal terror had never felt near until today.

In the great swarm of Galactic City, billions of beings continued with the ordinary routines and petty crises of their lives totally unaware of what was happening in the palace's medical ward. Marasiah tried to take that as a reminder that there was more to the galaxy than Force-users and their problems, and to carry that knowledge into her next meeting with the triumvirate. After reviewing the brief update received from Paqualis III- contact made, investigation in progress- concerns turned to other matters. She and Stazi sparred yet again over the inclusion of unreconstructed



Alliance loyalists in the upcoming senate elections, and on K'Kruhk's suggestion she gave small ground, promising a review of imprisoned and blacklisted dissidents and a partial lifting of the ban. Stazi accepted this, but clearly planned to push for further concessions at the next meeting. He also announced that, on his own initiative, he was going to recall a small portion of off-duty soldiers back into service, and Marasiah agreed to order the same for her Imperial fleets. Just in case, they agreed.

She left the meeting feeling assured that the galaxy was not, in fact, collapsing, but her confidence fell when she stepped outside of the chamber, checked her silenced comlink and found a message from her aide Astraal Vao. It said only to come to the medical ward as soon as possible.

Marasiah considered asking K'Kruhk to join her, then decided against it until knowing the problem. She hurried toward the medical ward, and as she crossed the long glassy walkway connecting it to the main palace complex she saw Astraal waiting, holds folded in front of her, expression quietly grim.

"Please follow me, Empress," Astraal said. She fell in beside Marasiah, who didn't break stride.

"Are we going to the observation level?"

"No, Empress. Just follow me. The Em-dee droid will explain once we get there."

Astraal led her to a small room deep within the complex. While there were no windows, flatscreen monitors filled one wall, showing over a dozen different views. Some looked to be evaluation rooms; others had sleeping beds and tables. Nearly all were occupied.

Within this observation room itself, there was only a medical droid. The bidepal machine lifted one arm in salutation and the photoreceptors in its face lit bright. Its tinny voice said, "Greetings, Empress. I am RMD-37. I have been evaluating your patients since they entered this facility eleven days ago."

Marasiah responded with a nod, confused. A good medical droid could handle everything from diagnosis to surgery, but she'd expected to meet with an organic doctor. She knew over a dozen were assigned to Ganner's case.

“Over the course of this morning, we have received an influx of visitors demonstrating the same symptoms as the initial patients. We have moved them to the level as Patients Krieg and Yobis and placed them in isolation for observation.”

It took Marasiah a second to parse that; then her chest tightened in dread. “Are you saying *more* Imperial Knights have lost contact with the Force?”

“These matters are notoriously difficult to measure quantitatively,” said the droid, “But yes, that seems to be the case.” With a stiff metal arm it gestured to the screens. “We have placed them all in single chambers so we may best observe their individual progress. They are being serviced by droids alone. Each unit is disinfected by microwave blast after visiting a patient to preserve sterility. Be assured I underwent this procedure immediately before meeting you, Empress.”

As her mind reeled with all this, Marasiah stepped up to the screens. Each showed a different room and a different figure. Some stood in place, some paced anxious circles, some lay on beds or sat on couches. Each one had a name on the bottom corner. These were her Knights. She recognized them all. Roam Ke, Sigel Dare, Heloy Sebat, Yalta Val.

Her heart stopped when she saw Antares. He was one of the pacing ones, making tight circles in the middle of his chamber. She’d seen him just this morning, gotten out of the same bed and kissed him before going off to her duties as empress. He’d been fine then, but when it had happened to Ganner and Yobis it had come quickly; a few hours’ fever, then deafness.

The world swam around her. Marasiah felt Astraal’s touch on her arm, steadying her, and forced her attention on the droid’s cold metal face.

“You’re talking about disinfectants. Droids. Sterility. Is this a... a disease of some kind?”

“Most of the new patients were never in this medical ward and have not had direct contact with Patient Krieg or Patient Yobis. Given the nature of the spread and apparent period of incubation, some form of airborne virus seems likely. We are allocating isolation rooms in anticipation of more patients in

the coming days. You will be showed to yours once you indicate you are ready.”

The world swam again. Disease. Isolation. Quarantine. Marasiah needed to be quarantined; through panic her rational mind understood that. She could handle some of her duties in isolation, but not all of them. If this had happened to her Knights it would happen to the Jedi too, which meant K’Kruhk would be here soon enough and only Stazi would be left running the government.

That was just the immediate issue. This disease- if that’s what it really was- was stealing the Force itself. She understood now: Ganner and Yobis had been returned to commit sabotage she’d never imagined. They were plague vectors aimed at the Jedi and Imperial Knights both. This disease could spell their extinction, and without them the galaxy would fall to chaos and destruction.

She groped for solace. A disease was stripping them of the Force, not arcane Sith magic. Diseases could be analyzed and overcome. The damage might even be reversible.

To the droid she said, “You have to find the cause of this. You must find the cause *and* the cure.”

“Of course, Empress,” the machine said dully. “We will allocate all resources to solving this puzzle.”

“It is not a *puzzle*,” she snapped. “It is... it’s...”

She couldn’t finish. It could be the end of everything.

“Empress...” Astraal asked softly, “Do *you* feel alright?”

Marasiah wanted to snap; how could she feel alright at a time like this? Then she understood the depth of Astraal’s question and gathered herself. She closed her eyes, took deep breaths, and looked for the Force within her. She found it, as easily as ever. She felt Astraal standing beside her, a presence she’d known must of her life. She felt strangers moving around in nearby hallways, slightly tense and also confused, ignorant of whatever was going on in their hospital’s sealed levels. When she reached out for the mind she knew better than anyone’s she found Antares but he was a blurred echo. She tried to caress him but he did not touch her back.

Marasiah opened her eyes and said, “I... I can feel the Force.” For now, she still had it.

“It is all the more imperative we move you into quarantine immediately, Empress,” said the droid.

She wanted to shout at it, tell it she’d kissed Draco five hours ago and if he was infected so was she, and today or tomorrow she’d lose the Force too. The memory of his touch made her shudder; something so sweet and reassuring should not have doomed her.

Though she wanted to scream, Marasiah composed herself as her father had taught her. She gathered regal dignity unto herself even as her heart and mind were breaking and said, “Of course. Please, tell me what I need to do.”

## Chapter Fourteen

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The journey from Jermac to Esseles was essentially a straight fall toward the galaxy's bright center. Ania wasn't a big fan of Core planets, as a rule. Too many people, too much money, too many rules. Worst of all were the people who thought their money made the rules. Nonetheless, she found her anticipation growing as *Free Agent* neared its destination.

A lot of that came from Kyra, of course. The girl was concerned about her droid but also clearly happy to be going someplace new. By her own admission she'd never been outside a few sectors of the Outer Rim; she was widely-travelled but hadn't seen any of the best the galaxy had to offer.

When it came time to end their voyage, Kyra joined Ania and AG-37 in *Free Agent*'s cockpit. She hunched behind the older woman, clinging to the back of the co-pilot's seat. As Ania ran last-minute system checks she said, "Hey, A-gee. Given that we're suddenly flush with liquid assets, have you thought about buying a new ship?"

The droid cogitated for a moment. "*Free Agent* suits my purposes well. I have had it for quite some time."

"Sounds like you're sentimental about it."

"I was merely pointing out there is no immediate need to purchase a new vessel. Even with our considerable spoils we must prioritize where to best allocate funds."

Ania looked over her shoulder and told Kyra, very seriously, "He's quite passionate, for a droid." The girl smirked.

Warning lights repeated on AG-37's console. He said, "Stand by to exit hyperspace. Miss Kyra, I recommend you take a seat."

She did just that, strapping into the one behind Ania. AG-37 grabbed the lever on his console, pushed it forward, and dropped them into realspace. The light of hyperspace withered to starpoints and sitting dead ahead of them was Esseles itself.

Ania had never been here, but it didn't sound bad as far as Core worlds went. Haloed by a thin white ring of dust particles and covered with green continents and brackish oceans, it looks dignified and peaceful from orbit. It had been the center of a regional empire a long time ago, but nowadays it was a comfortably wealthy, well-located planet that also avoided the choking overpopulation of worlds like Brentaal, Metellos, or worst of all Coruscant. Some pretty elite corporations were headquartered here, but no matter how hard Ania searched the databases, she'd never found any mention of this Thrumble Memorial Foundation. If anyone but AG-37 told her about it, she'd have thought she was being conned.

AG-37 didn't hail their hosts directly, but apparently their approach was marked and a beacon lit for them to follow. As *Free Agent* started bouncing into the atmosphere Ania asked, "Any sign of our partners in crime?"

"*Mynock* exited hyperspace thirty seconds ago." The droid tapped his console. "I am signaling them to follow our lead now."

"How did you hook up with those guys anyway?" asked Kyra.

Ania laughed dryly. "Long story. We'll tell it to you later. Honestly, I'm a little surprised they followed us. I expected them to take their money and run."

"Skywalker's droid wants to see this as much as I do," Kyra reminded.

"I know. I just didn't think *he* would care. Skywalker, I mean."

"I guess he does," Kyra shrugged, then added, "I think it says a lot about people, the way they treat their droids."

"I concur," said AG-37. "Though naturally, I am biased on that subject."

*Free Agent* rocked as they passed through the lowest layer of cloud cover. When gray vapor pulled away they soared over an expanse of ocean. Kyra unbuckled her seat and stood up, arms around Ania's headrest as she looked through the viewport.

"What is it?" asked Ania.

Kyra kept staring at the endless spread of water. "I've.... Never seen an ocean before. Not this close. Not that I can remember. All the planets I've been to..."

Ania smiled. When travelling with her parents aboard their freighter *Fast Start*, she'd gotten a chance to see all kinds of worlds and landscapes, and at each new arrival she'd been restless with anticipation for the new sights, sounds, smells she'd discover. After losing her parents the wonder had gone out of the galaxy, replaced by the grim scraping necessities of survival. Watching Kyra now she felt a little bit of those good things return, untouched by bitterness or grief.

When they arrived at their destination Ania wasn't sure what to think. The complex was located on an island chain, and its buildings were a set of pearly-white discs peeking over the edge of a cliff that dropped into the ocean. It looked like some rich person's estate, not the greatest cybernetics research and development site in the galaxy.

As *Free Agent* extended its gear and set down on the landing pad Ania said, "You're going to have to tell us how you know these people, A-gee."

"I do not have to tell you anything. But I may."

"I've got a theory."

AG-37 flicked overhead switches to being *Free Agent*'s cooldown procedure. "I presume you are going to tell me."

"I think this is the place where you learned how to roll dice. And do all those other things assassin droids aren't meant to do."

"You would be surprised. Assassin droids are required to be versatile."

Ania unbuckled her crash webbing and rose from her seat. "That's not a denial."

"No. It is not." AG-37 stood up as well. He was so tall the peak of his conical head nearly scraped the ceiling. "Now let's attend to the business at hand. Miss Kyra, would you like to do the honors?"

She nodded. "I'll handle Sleepy. Thanks."

The three of them filed out of the cockpit and into the rear hold. Jao and Sauk stood over the protocol droid's broken, seemingly lifeless body, which had been bound to the shoulder straps Kyra normally carried it on. Jao helped it onto her back, the girl shifted to the weight until it seemed comfortable, then nodded. She was ready to get it started.

As the five of them walked down the ramp, *Mynock* was settling onto the nearest landing pad. Its engines roared and hot air blew Kyra's hair into her face, and they waited until the ship was fully settled to head for the semi-circular door that led into the complex proper. As they walked *Mynock's* own landing ramp extended. R2-D2 was the first one to come down, rolling fast and heading for the same doors, while Skywalker and company trotted to catch up.

By the time they reached the door a small greeting party had emerged from within, five figures in all. Two were bulbous-headed Biths wearing white labcoats universal to scientists everywhere. Two were bipedal, silver-bodied droids, and from the structure of their legs and joints Ania could see they were designed for agility and speed. She didn't see weapons on them but they struck her as combat droids. Finally, right in the middle and incongruous against the rest, was a human woman. She looked barely older than Ania, tall and blonde-haired and enviably proportioned.

"It's good to see you again, AG-37," the woman said, smiling.

"It is fine to see you as well," the assassin droid said. "Thank you for agreeing to help."

"It's no problem at all. May I see the droid in question?"

"I have him here," Kyra said. Awkwardly, she turned around to let the blond woman look over the battered droid. As she did R2-D2 entered into another fit of enthusiastic squeals and chirps. Ania exchanged glances with Skywalker, who looked just as confused as her.



“With your permission, we’ll take him now and begin our evaluation,” the blond woman said. “We can’t guarantee anything until we examine his main cortical processor.”

“Okay. Sure, you can take him.” Kyra looked slightly disappointed, but she slung the protocol droid off her back. The blonde woman took it and handed it to the Bith technicians, who in turn went straight inside.

“You can come with us,” the woman gestured for the door. “This may take several days. We have guest facilities where you’ll be quite comfortable in that time.”

Skywalker ran a hand through his messy hair. “Are we getting charged for that separately?”

Deliah smacked him on the arm. “Stop being stingy. We’re rich now.”

“Yeah, and where better to splurge on luxury than a droid lab?”

She nudged his shoulder. “I’m sure we can find ways to make it fun, *mesh’la*.”

“As you’ll see,” the blond woman said, “Our guest suite is very well-appointed.”

The group narrowed formation as they stepped inside the complex. The hallways were as sleek and bright as the exterior, and Ania noted as many droids inside as white-coated staff.

As they walked Jariah stepped beside AG-37 and asked in a whisper, “*That’s* your mother? She’s even more *yum yum* than Cade’s.”

Two steps behind him Kyra said, “She’s a droid, isn’t she?”

That took Ania by surprise. Jao asked, “How did you know that?”

The girl frowned. “I’m not sure. I just.... knew, somehow.”

Jao threw a glance at Ania, one that said *told you so*, but Ania had enough to grapple with. Eyes on the blond head bobbing give meters ahead of them she whispered, “Really? She looks... really real.”

“Mistress Guri is a Human Replica Droid,” AG-37 said plainly. “She was, in fact, originally constructed for a purpose very similar to my own.”

“She doesn’t *look* like it,” Jariah muttered.

“There is obvious value in an assassin droid that does not look like an assassin. Initially she was only that, but after the death of her owner she managed to modify and expand her original programming significantly. Since then she has devoted her efforts to exploring the possibilities of artificial sentience and droid autonomy. For some very fortunate droids, she has shared some of the liberation she received.”

“She did that for *you*,” Jao said. “How long ago was that?”

AG-37’s photoreceptors pulsed. “Approximately one hundred and thirty-five standard years.”

Jariah whistled, impressed. Kyra asked, “Was that around the same time you met Artoo and Sleepy?”

“It was not an unrelated encounter. But that was a complicated event, and it happened a very long time ago.”

Ania’s head was spinning from it all, both the revelations and the nagging sense that AG-37 was hiding something. He’d delivered everything in the same cool monotone as ever, but in the years she’d known him she’d learned to read his moods and intentions. There was something he didn’t want to talk about.

She wouldn’t get an answer now. They reached a lobby where hallways branched off at three points. The Biths carried their broken droid patient through a secure set of doors, and Guri turned to her guests with a polite smile. It was a *human* smile, one that mixed professionalism, earnest warmth, curiosity, and faint wariness. Ania still couldn’t believe this was a droid. She’d been around droids all her life, and often liked and trusted them more than people, but they’d all been machines with metal faces and tinny voices. This Guri straddled a line, mixing both, and Ania wasn’t sure what to make of her.

“The evaluation process will take several hours. After that we’ll have a better idea what repairs will be necessary. I can show you to the guest wing, where we’ve prepared rooms for you.”

Because no one else knew quite what to say, AG-37 took the lead. “That would be ideal. Thank you for assistance.”

“It’s not problem at all.” Guri’s smile tilted mischievously. “I like to think of this as paying off a debt. I’m sure you understand, A-gee.”

AG-37's photoreceptors pulsed, but he said nothing. No one else did either, so they followed Guri to this place she had prepared.

Nothing had prepared Kyra for this place. Everything in the guest wing of the Thrumble Foundation complex felt like the opposite of what she'd known. The carpets were clean and soft under her bare feet, the walls a spotless white, the beds twice the size of anything she'd ever slept in. There was a ten-meter swimming pool and a greenhouse garden that sampled plants from a hundred worlds she'd never heard of. By the time she'd explored it all she was told that Guri's technicians believed they could restore at least ninety percent of Sleepy's processor functions, though it would take several days to accomplish. Kyra hardly minded; she wanted to enjoy this place.

The first evening they were served dinner as a big messy group. Fresh food came on a clean hot plate, and though she'd never heard of the dish before it was delicious. They prepared a rare Mon Calamari fish for Sauk, while Jao and Ania split some sauce-coated nerf cutlet. Cade Skywalker, Jariah, and Deliah managed to down two bottles of Corellian wine between them. Food, drink, and conversation went on for hours, wandering and relaxed. Kyra had never had a family before, at least none she could remember well. She wondered if this was what it felt like.

The best part of the already breathtaking day came at the very end. When she stepped out onto the balcony the sun was going down over the ocean, its red disc sinking toward the distant horizon. The air was warm and heavy, with a salty tang the likes of which Kyra had never smelled before. She went to the waist-high railing, considered a moment, then swung both legs over it and sat down on its rim, so her feet dangled over a two-hundred-meter drop into churning waves. She watched water surge and explode white foam against rock, and she watched the horizon swallow the sun and the sky turn violet and the water turn black. Then, finally, she watched stars emerge in the night sky. She gave up all sense of time and it seemed to take forever and a moment for all these changes to happen. She devoured them all, every color

and sound and shade, and it was only when everything went full night-black that she felt truly sated.

So this was it. This was what life was like when you were free.

She was still sitting on the railing, feet dangling over distant ocean, when she heard the door behind her open. Somehow she knew it would be Ania. The older woman leaned against the railing on her right and said, "Just checking to make sure you don't fall over."

"I'm okay." She kicked her feet into the night air like a child.

"You seem more than okay," Ania observed with a grin.

"I am. I never thought I'd see... any of this. Thank you. Thank you so much."

"There's nothing to thank me for."

"Yes there is." Kyra paused to gather thoughts and words. "You and your friends... You've been through a lot together. I never had any idea how much until Jao started telling me on the way here."

"We were... busy for a while. But we've been laying low for a year now, trying to take safe and easy jobs." Ania snorted. "I guess we broke that rule badly, didn't we?"

"It paid off."

"You're right. It really did. All that bullion we got... I don't know what we're going to do with it. I never thought I'd see that much money in my life, and now... It all seems unreal."

Kyra tilted her head back and closed her eyes. She let the salty wind play across her and felt hair-strands tickle her face. Very quietly she said, "I've never felt more real."

Ania said nothing but she didn't go away. After a while Kyra opened her eyes and asked, "Why did you take me with you?"

"I thought we had a lot in common. Almost too much." Ania paused, then asked, "How did your parents die, if you don't mind my asking?"

As a rule Kyra tried not to look into the past, but tonight, surrounded by ocean breeze and stars, it wasn't so bad to remember. "We lived on Svivren. Fighting only got there at the very end of the war. My parents... I don't even know

what they did. I think they were bureaucrats, or clerks somewhere. They never hurt anybody, never got involved, but then the war came... Some missile hit our apartment building. I don't know if it was Imperial or Alliance. Most people got killed. I was... lucky."

"I'm sorry," Ania said, then, "I was lucky too."

Kyra looked back at the other woman. Ania was older but not *that* old. Five years, maybe. Any age was too young to lose parents in a war. "What happened?" she asked.

"My mom and dad were freighter pilots. They owned a big cargo hauler. I went with them and they went all around the galaxy. My mother..."

Ania stopped. Kyra could tell she wanted to tell so much but was afraid to, not because of Kyra, but because of something in the story itself.

"It happened at the very end of the war," Ania said, avoiding whatever had bothered her. "The Imperials had just taken Kashyyyk and all the systems around it. My parents were trying to help the Jedi and some Alliance troops slip past the Imps... It didn't work. Our freighter got blown up. I made it out in an escape pod. I don't think anyone else did."

"I'm sorry," Kyra muttered.

"After that I was on my own. I had to scrape by to survive. I even... I fell in with some bad people. I got under the thumb of a guy. Rav reminded me of him. A lot."

"I get it," Kyra swallowed. "But you got away from him too. In the end."

Ania looked down over the edge. There was just blackness where water met cliff but they could still hear the waves, crashing and receding like they had for ages.

Eventually Ania said, "Yeah, I got away. We both did, and the bad stuff's long gone. You've just got to keep moving forward, without looking back. It can get really hard sometimes... but sometimes things work out better than you'd ever hoped."

Her smile was happy and sad at once. Kyra suddenly realized how badly she wanted to trust this woman. Trust was habit she'd tried hard to break in her old life, extending it only to a broken old droid who she knew could never harm her, but the need to trust had always been there. There'd been

a deep hole in her life and it would be so easy to let Ania and her friends fill it. It was a frightening feeling, like vertigo.

"You should take your time over the next couple of days," Ania said. "Think about what you want to do. Where you want to go." Who you want to go with, she left unsaid.

"I know," Kyra said. "I guess I can do anything I want, can't I?"

Something tugged Ania's smile downward, but her voice was still warm when she said, "That's what makes the choice so hard. So think about it. You've got time."

"I will."

Ania pushed away from the railing and turned for the door. "Don't fall in either."

"I won't," Kyra laughed lightly, and watched her go.

She remained there for a while longer, listening to the sound of waves, sometimes closing her eyes and other staring at the stars. Eventually she went inside, walked on bare feet across the hallway's soft clean carpet, and went into her room. Guri had said she would bring Kyra some changes of clothes, and sure enough, several sets of trousers and tops hung anew in the closet. The bed waited to envelope her, broad and soft. The one possession she'd brought with her from Socorro sat on its edge.

Kyra sat beside it in the dark. Part of her wanted to get rid of that ratty old tool bag and everything in it. Part of her wanted to keep it as some small keepsake, a reminder of the misery she'd triumphed over. She stuck a hand inside and knew the contents by touch: the hydrosponder, the flux calibrator, the micro-welder and the voltmeter.

Where her fingers touched something flat and smooth she tightened her grip and pulled out the one item she didn't know intimately. It was the black pyramid she'd recovered from Rav's treasure cave, and as she held it up in front of her ghostly light trickled up from its edges to form the image of an old woman, face half-covered by hooded robe.

As before she said, "My name is Dath Traya. For what purpose to you seek my knowledge?"

Kyra didn't know what to say. She didn't know what it was, and a tightness in her chest told her that once she answered things would never be the same.

Impelled by fear she stuffed the object back into her bag. The light vanished and she was alone in the soft dark room. She moved the bag to a side table, pulled back the broad bed's covers, then sunk onto the cushions beneath. When Kyra closed her eyes she forgot the trill of fear from a moment ago. There was only silence and softness.

Jao hadn't gotten much exposure to frivolous luxury as an Imperial Knight, and he certainly hadn't gotten it while chasing across the galaxy with Ania and company. This place was making him restless, and the full-service fitness center and pool weren't enough for him to work off his energy.

The afternoon of their second day here, he went to find Kyra. At lunch she'd said something about looking at plants in the greenhouse, and sure enough, that's where Jao found her. She was crouched low, examining a blue-petaled Ithorian starflower. When he got close she stood up to face him, though he'd avoided making any sound.

"Hi," she said simply.

"Hello yourself." Jao smiled. "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

"Um, all right." Her hands went to her sides and she looked around the greenhouse. They were alone. "Do you mean here?"

"That's fine. Let's just walk around the path."

He started talking and she fell in alongside him. He didn't need the Force to know she was confused and a little off-put. Ania got on well with the girl; they had all manner of things in common. Jao did not, and he sensed he intimidated her.

It was best to be out with what they *did* have in common. He began, "You know that I used to be an Imperial Knight. That I was trained in the ways of the Force."

"I've seen you use it."

"Do you know what the Force is?"

She shook her head. "I've just heard things. Imperial Knights. Jedi. Sith. Magic powers, like moving things with your mind. You're the first Force-user I ever met. You and Skywalker."

"Skywalker is... a different kind of Force-user."

“Aren’t Skywalkers supposed to be Jedi?”

Jao smirked. “You *have* heard things. Cade Skywalker is... not a typical Jedi.”

“What’s the difference between Imperial Knights and Jedi?”

That was a question you could debate endlessly. Jao tried for the simple version. “We’ve both sworn to use the Force to protect people, and to bring about justice and peace. Imperial Knights believe the best way to do that is by working for Empress Fel and obeying her orders. Jedi think they serve the *will* of the Force, and nothing else.”

“What does that mean? What *is* the Force?”

“The Force is something that connects all life. It’s an energy field and it touches all things, but only a small number of beings can actually touch it back.”

“Why?” she asked. “Why can only a few people touch it? That seems... unfair.”

“The reasons are complicated. Genetics plays a part of it. A lot we really don’t understand. Force-sensitivity often manifests as a kind of sixth sense. Some people are really empathic toward others. Some seem to see things before they happen. In other people it shows up as a telekinetic skill. They can move objects without physically touching them.” He took a breath and plunged in. “I saw you doing some of that during the fight in the sarlacc pit.”

She stopped and stared. “You’re saying... I have this Force?”

“I’ve seen signs of it. They say you’re a natural with machines, that you figure them out on instinct.” She nodded dumbly. “That can be a sign of Force-aptitude also.”

“But I never... I never thought... I’m not special.”

“You’ve been surviving on your own since you were *seven*. That you got through that intact and are here now means you’re very special. I think the Force was watching over you this whole time.”

Kyra looked down at the floor, thinking hard. He could feel her emotions reel and her thoughts grope for purchase. He didn’t envy her that and was starting to regret having brought this up in the first place. The girl needed to know, though, despite what Ania had said. She *deserved* to know. She



possessed a rare gift, one that could totally change her life if she allowed it to. It was a choice she'd have to make, and he wanted her choice to be an informed one.

"There are many ways to study the Force," he told her. "The Imperial Knights and the Jedi are both valid schools. They both have wisdom to offer, and people who'd be willing to teach you more."

"What about the Sith?"

"The Sith don't care about peace or justice of the will of the Force. They bend the Force to *their* will. The monsters who ruled this galaxy for the past decade were Sith. You've seen all the horrors they brought. Thankfully, most of them are gone now."

She kept looking down, trying to assemble her thoughts. "Do you really think I could be one? A Jedi or Imperial Knight?"

"I'm not sure. I'm not even an Imperial Knight myself, not anymore. Not technically. But I know people who'd be happy to evaluate your potential and even train you if they think you have promise."

"And you think I have... promise?"

"I've seen it, and not just in that fight. You knew Guri was a droid before A-gee told us. How?"

"I don't know. She just... felt different."

"Exactly. Because droids don't show up in the Force the way living beings do."

Kyra exhaled. "I... I need to think about this."

"Of course. I'm not expecting you to do anything right now. Just think about what I've told you, and if you have any questions, don't hesitate to ask."

"Okay." She edged away, eager to leave.

"You can go. We'll talk about this later."

"Okay," she repeated, and nearly ran out of the greenhouse.

Jaο remained there, surrounded by sunlight and verdure, wondering if he could have handled that better. The girl had received a lifechanging revelation; shock was unavoidable. He hoped they could talk about this again, possibly tonight, once her mind started to settle.

After the conversation Jaο was still restless. He spent the rest of the afternoon mentally replaying it, remembering

what he'd said and realizing what he should have. He decided to vent that energy and changed into loose clothes. He walked past the pool and spotted two blurs in the water: one brown Mon Cal, one pink Zeltron. He went past it to the exercise room, and when he stepped inside was greeted by the sight of Cade Skywalker and Jariah Syn, shirtless and tattooed with Rav's Bloody Bones. The former lay on the bench press and the latter was set to spot.

From beneath the bar Skywalker grinned. "Long time no see, Imp *bukee*. You planning to get some sets in?"

"I'll use another machine."

"Fine by me. I was wondering—"

He didn't finish. The door Jao had just come through slid open again and Ania came through. Her eyes were dead on Jao and she said, very seriously, "Can we talk for a minute?"

Behind them Jariah chimed, "Trouble in paradise?"

Jao ignored them. This wasn't something he could object to. "Okay, Ania. We'll go outside."

They stepped into the hall and the door was barely shut behind them when Ania said, "Kyra told me what you said to her today. What were you *thinking*?"

Her anger took him by surprise. "I told her the truth. She needed to know she can use the Force. Is she upset?"

Ania sighed angrily. "You've thrown her world upside-down, Jao."

"What did you expect me to do?" he asked, honestly confused.

"She just got free after three years under Rav. She's never even been to any halfway-decent planet until today. She needs time to settle and get used to it."

"Listen, I'm sorry if I was hasty, but there's no telling where we'll go after this. I figured she should know now, since we'll be waiting here for a few days."

"Well you should have waited."

"Maybe I should have," he said, but he still thought he'd made the right choice. "I can go talk to her again."

She put a palm on his chest. "Not now. Stop trying to recruit her, Jao."

He felt like he'd been punched. "I'm not trying to recruit her to do anything. I'm not even an Imperial Knight anymore,

remember? I quit that so I could chase you around the galaxy.”

“Me? You said you’re following the will of the Force or whatever.”

“I am. But this isn’t about me, this is about Kyra. I’m just want her to know her potential. Do you have any idea what this means, what she could become?”

“No.” Ania said stiffly. “I can’t. I don’t have any fancy Force powers, remember?”

“Okay, but trust me. Trust *her*. She’s not a kid. She’s young but she’d been through a lot.”

“That doesn’t mean she has to sign up for your Imp Jedi class right away.”

Jao sighed. “Ania, I’m not trying to steal her from you.”

She flinched and dropped her hand. “What are you talking about?”

“Oh, come on. You’re protective of her. You think she’s you five years ago. But she’s *not* you. With the Force she could be so much *more*—”

“Than what? Me?”

“No, I—” He stumbled, cursed himself. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that the way it sounded.”

“Oh, that’s eloquent.” She rolled her eyes and started away. “Give it a rest, Jao. I’m serious.”

He didn’t protest or call after her, just watched her go. As he stood in the empty hall, trying to make sense of all that, he realized he had another conversation he’d spend the rest of the day replaying and regretting in his head.

He wasn’t sure how long he stood out there, but eventually Skywalker and Jariah came out of the fitness center. Skywalker gave him a wry look and said, “You still here?”

“You should have gone after her, *pateesa*,” Jariah slapped him on the shoulder, friendly-like. “Can’t just let your *municheeka* run off like that. You’ll regret it.”

It took Jao a second to translate their Huttese. “What? No. Ania and I... we’re not like that.”

Skywalker snorted. “You Imp Knights are even more *grancha stoopa* about your emotions than the Jedi, and I didn’t think that was possible. Do what you want, but if you

ask me, that stray you picked up is better off without the Force.”

“Do you really believe that?” He looked at Skywalker hard.

The other’s smug smile wilted; he looked away and shrugged. “I figure, if the Force really needs you to do something, it’ll make sure you do it. But if it doesn’t bother you, best you don’t bother it. Been my experience anyway. C’mon, Jariah, I need a shower.”

The two of them sauntered down the hall. Jao watched them go, then stared at the door to the empty fitness center. Eventually he decided to go inside and burn away his thoughts with exercise. This post-victory vacation wasn’t nearly as peaceful as he’d hoped.

## Chapter Fifteen

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Over the next three days, the shape of things revealed itself in the medical ward of the government palace. The numbers of Imperial Knights and Jedi who'd lost connection to the Force mounted, and by the end of the first day an entire wing of the complex was sealed off. A cover story was concocted for the news-nets and still patients kept coming. By dawn of the second day there were no longer enough rooms to isolate patients individually and by noon most rooms housed at least two. Patients came from every conceivable species, from humans to Wookiee to Gand, even the Jedi's sole Toydarian acolyte. None exhibited any signs of ill health, but all had grown deaf to the Force.

By noon on the third day, every single member of the Jedi Order and Imperial Knights on Coruscant had been moved to the same wing in the medical complex. Single-occupancy isolation rooms were reserved for the relative handful that had yet to develop symptoms. All of these were the sole representatives of their respective species, and the fear was that their symptoms were merely delayed by unusual biology. Knights active in other parts of the galaxy had been told to quarantine themselves aboard their ships or within their homes. In just a few shuddering days, the Force-users who'd pumped like lifeblood through the new Galactic Federation had clotted in place, and no one was sure what would happen next.

Against all this, it was especially stunning that Empress Marasiah Fel was unaffected.

They'd moved her to private quarters kept in airtight isolation, spartan but as spacious as the hospital could allow. Her only visitors were droids, which came each morning to take blood samples for comparison with those from the many Force-blind knights. Her room had a full-service communications suite, and as the crisis deepened she was constantly switching between conversations with her subordinates in the palace, her generals and admirals in the military, her uncle Hogrum, Admiral Stazi, Astraal Vao, K'Kruhk and the members of the Jedi Council trapped in this same building. The constant conversations were the only thing that kept her from going mad; when moments of silence came she wanted to scream. Three days in and she hadn't slept soundly since before this began.

But *she* could feel the Force. She could feel the helpless frustration of the blind knights who filled the building; it was like an ocean that might drown her. She could pick up tools without touching them and lift herself into the air. To burn off stress during one quiet hour she took out her lightsaber and practiced every dueling style she remembered. The weightless blade felt as natural as ever.

On the evening of the third day Marasiah finally received some clarity. The conference, such as it was, took the form of a ring of life-sized holograms arrayed around her as the last light died in the sky outside her window. Doctor Ampossa, Ho'din chief of the medical ward, was represented. So were Jedi Masters K'Kruhk, Lowbacca, and Tili Qua. Her husband Antares, Treis Sinde, and Hogrum Chalk represented the Imperial Knights. The blue light of their holos cast the otherwise-dark room into sepulchral glow. Marasiah felt like she was speaking with a choir of ghosts.

"We have made some progress over the past few day comparing blood samples. The variety of species among our patients was helpful in looking for commonalities," Doctor Ampossa explained, "But what was truly helpful was using the empress' sample as a control."

"Do you know why the empress hasn't shown symptoms?" asked Antares.

Ampossa made a hissing noise from the corner of his mouth, a Ho'din sound of ambivalence. "We are uncertain as

to the *why*. However, we have been able to mark the difference in her sample versus infected humans like yourself, Master Draco. Put simply, this disease is affecting the midi-chlorians in your bloodstream.”

K’Kruhk exhaled deeply. “I thought as much.”

“The midi-chlorians in our cells do not just allow us to speak to the Force,” chirped Tili Qua. The squat Chandra-Fan Jedi spread his hands. “Midi-chlorians spark life itself. If our midi-chlorians were to die, *we* would die, and not just us. They exist within the cells of every living being in the galaxy.”

“Except Yuuzhan Vong and their life-forms,” K’Kruhk pointed out.

“Unfortunately, we don’t have Yuuzhan Vong present to compare samples from,” said Ampossa, though he didn’t sound eager to find one of the aliens. “As you’ve pointed out, midi-chlorians exist with me, though I’ve never touched the Force. With that in mind, we’ve also began collecting samples from seemingly non-affected non-Force-users. These have also been compared to samples with the infected Force-users, and the empress. We have also compared samples taken over the past few days with blood and tissue records from current patients taken at least a year ago. The results were... quite startling.”

The Ho’din’s holographic ghost turned to Marasiah. “Empress, you are the only one whose midi-chlorians have *not* exhibited any change. For all other samples- Jedi, Imperial Knights, palace staff, even my own- there has been a visible change in midi-chlorian composition.”

“You mean a decrease in number?” asked Sinde.

“No, Not at all. These midi-chlorians have been altered on a base level. I... I admit the nature of these organisms is poorly understood. I’ve been working with Jedi healers to expand my knowledge, but...”

“Even in the days before Palpatine, their nature was best understood by only a few,” said K’Kruhk. “I’m afraid he eradicated much of that knowledge. We are *all* fumbling in the dark, doctor.”

Antares crossed arms over his chest. “That doesn’t give us much help finding a cure.”

"I *hope* you can be cured," said Ampossa, "But from what our research shows, your midi-chlorians have essentially mutated. They have been crippled... but only partially. As you said, if your midi-chlorians were totally destroyed then you- we- would all be dead."

Lowbacca gave a series of Wookiee roars. Text at the bottom of his holo translated: "It seems like this virus was designed to kill the parts of our midi-chlorians that access the Force, while leaving us, ourselves, intact."

"Quite right," said Ampossa. "I'd remind you that a virus that's too successful destroys itself. If it kills its host too quickly or too thoroughly, it inevitably kills what it needs to survive, and so it dies. This virus does *not* kill. For most hosts- though of us who've never used the Force- it doesn't produce so much as a headache. Mind you, the body is normally fully of microbes that jump harmlessly from host to host, often across many sentient species. This would be no exception, except for the harm it does to midi-chlorians."

"Big exception," Antares said bitterly. "This has to be an artificial virus. Sith?"

"Why would the Sith make a virus that cuts beings off from the Force?" asked Hogrum. "They'd be sabotaging themselves, unless they had an antidote. Or a vaccine."

"All the more reason to find them," Sinde said.

Marasiah's thoughts went to Azlyn Rae and Shado Vao, she and wondered if they'd fallen victim to it yet. They'd been in contact with Ganner since his return; they were surely infected, which meant they'd been unknowingly spreading the virus to the people on Paqualis III, who were in turn getting in ships and spreading it to more worlds. It was a dizzying thought, especially when she realized it was already spreading out from Coruscant on every conceivable spacelane. If she used her executive powers to command all interstellar traffic in the Galactic Federation to a halt, it would do no good; half her citizens would disobey and attempts to enforce it militarily would invite disaster.

Then she thought of Morrigan Corde and Gunner Yage, off chasing Darth Maladi across the stars. It was a sickening thought, but the author of her father's ruin was the galaxy's best remaining hope.



“There’s a very important question, still,” said Sinde. “Why hasn’t the empress shown symptoms?”

Marasiah stood very still as all seven holographic ghosts stared at her. Doctor Ampossa gave another side-mouthed hiss and said, “I simply do not know. I’m sorry. In any disease, natural immunity is to be expected from a very small portion of the infected. But for it to be the empress alone... We do not know.”

“The symptoms may just be delayed,” Marasiah said.

“I know. And I’d like to keep you under observation for a few more days at least, Empress.”

“What of the rest of us?” asked Hogrum. “Are we to stay locked here indefinitely until someone finds a cure? That could take weeks. Months. And as you’ve said, doctor, the virus has already spread far beyond this hospital. There’s no point in keeping us all quarantined.”

“I am aware of that,” Ampossa said weakly. Marasiah could almost see his reedy body bending under the weight of so much pressure. He’d been dealt an impossible problem to solve; her heart would have gone out to him if her grief wasn’t already spread so widely.

“I imagine it would be best to keep us under observation for a few days, at least,” Sinde said. “However, Empress, your absence *is* being noticed. It may be wise for you to make yourself seen. Publicly.”

She looked to Ampossa. He hissed once more and spread his hands. “I would prefer to keep you under observation as well, Empress. However... I can see no need to quarantine you when you have already been exposed to the virus.”

“Thank you, Doctor. I will stay in the medical ward overnight and make my decision tomorrow.” She looked to K’Kruhk’s holo. “Master Jedi, I can’t order you what to do with your knights, on Coruscant or elsewhere.”

“I’d like to keep our Jedi under observation right now,” said the Whiphid. “Nearly half the Order is off Coruscant. None have reported symptoms yet, and I’ve ordered them to quarantine until further notice.”

“What about the two knights we went to investigate the kidnapping that started all of this?” asked Sinde.

There was a pause; no one volunteered reply. Marasiah took a deep breath and said, "I believe I should notify them myself."

*Scarlet Star* had been sitting on Paqualis III and its crew was more than restless. When Anj reported that they'd received a hail from Hondo Karr, Shado and Azlyn crammed into the cockpit with her to listen. The results elicited mixed feelings; Karr's recorded voice message stated that his people had marked the ship from Nubia as belonging to one Thorum Rhal, who was indeed one of Yaga Auch's main lieutenants. They were investigating Rhal's current whereabouts and didn't know how long it would take to locate him.

Karr also reported that another job had come up for his team and they'd be incommunicado until further notice; Karr had assured them it wouldn't take more than a standard day. Neither Shado, Azlyn, nor Anj had any idea of what to make of it, and the Imperial Knight griped, "I almost thought this was important to him, but I guess not."

"This *is* important. They've been looking for proof the Sith hired Auch's for years," Anj said, but her voice was less certain than her words.

"So what do we do now? Just continue waiting?" asked Shado.

"Apparently." Anj dropped lazily into *Star's* pilot's seat. "If you two want to join me in going out at night, you're more than welcome. It would give you a little variety beyond saber-practice."

"We're all right here," Shado said.

"Suit yourself," Anj said. "I *have* met Force-users who know how to have fun, you know. It's not forbidden."

Shado recalled that Rogue Squadron had done a lot of ops with *Mynock* and Cade Skywalker's team toward the end of the war. He smiled weakly and said, "If I change my mind, I'll let you know."

That night Anj went out as usual. She'd been right that sparring was getting a little repetitive, and Shado decided to try something different that night. He told Azlyn that he'd decided to shut himself in his cabin and try meditating, and recommended she do the same. She'd said she'd try but had

acted evasive. Since their conversation about Ganner's illness she seemed to have been avoiding him, as though ashamed to have broken her vow of secrecy. Shado tried to forgive her that and focus on himself; it had been a while since he'd done good meditating and he hoped it would give his head a necessary clearing. Azlyn's revelation had done him no good mentally.

Yet as he prepared for the meditation session he felt a mild headache coming on. When he sat cross-legged on the bunk he felt abnormally warm inside, his skin clammy. He tried to push his physical ailments away, to remove himself from the crude matter of his flesh and connect his soul with the ethereal living network of the Force itself.

Some Jedi had problems separating from everyday stress and finding the living Force, but Shado was generally not one of them. Today it was difficult; whereas he usually felt the Force flow into him when he found inner stillness, it now seemed to hover at the edges of himself. When he tried to draw that power inward it eluded him, like water running through his fingers. He tried to focus on that power, to see it with his mind's eye, but it dissolved like mist.

His head still ached; his heart quickened. Sweat dampened his skin as he tried again and again to draw the living Force inside him. When he reached for it, it was impossible to grasp. When he looked for it, it was impossible to see. When he forced himself to stillness and listened for the music of life, there was only silence.

Finally Shado fell out of seated position and lay face-up on the bed, sweating into damp sheets, staring at the plain bulkhead above him. His mind whirled in denial; this had happened to Ganner but it shouldn't happen to him. It *couldn't* happen to him. He looked to the other side of the cabin and saw his lightsaber dangling from a hook next to his jacket. Still laying on his back he reached a hand toward it. He remembered the so-familiar feeling of its smooth metal in his palm, his thumb against its switch. He willed the lightsaber to come to him.

It hung where it was and didn't budge.

Shado's heart was pounding. He rolled out of bed. He stared at his blue hands, clenched them into fists, felt

fingernails dig into palm, released. He flattened a hand and slapped his face, hard. He pivoted to face a bulkhead, punched it, and felt pain shoot up his arm. He was alive. This was no dream. This was real and he could feel pain in the nerves of his body, but he could not feel the Force.

There was a small mirror hanging on the wall next to the closet. He staggered to it and stared at himself. He saw the same blue face, with brow-ridges roofing dark eyes, high cheekbones and a strong chin. He was the same being. Everything was the same, except the Force no longer spoke to him.

He didn't know how long he stood before the mirror before he realized the comlink in his jacket was buzzing. Breathing hard he took it out and managed to say, "What is it?"

"Shado, it's me," Azlyn said. "Get up to the cockpit, now. The empress is calling."

Somehow he staggered down the hall to the cockpit. Azlyn was in the pilot's seat and the co-pilot's was empty; Anj must have still been out on the town. Projected over the central comm console was a shrunken holo-image of Empress Fel herself.

He swallowed and sat in the co-pilot's chair. "Greetings, Empress," he said.

"Hello, Master Vao. Master Rae tell me your partner is currently unavailable. That's good. I wanted to have this conversation in private, though you can let her know as much as you think she needs to afterward." The empress took a breath and said, "Right before you started this mission, Ganner Krieg and Kel Yobis lost their ability to touch the Force. It began with a slight fever and headache. Shortly thereafter, they became unable to sense or use it in any way. I'm afraid their affliction has spread further."

Of course it would come to this. Gripping his chair's armrests Shado said, "How far?"

"We believe now that Master Krieg and Knight Yobis were infected with a virus, then returned to us so it might spread. It appears to incubate inside a host body for between one to two weeks before showing symptoms, but once it does, the onset is swift and severe. Nearly every Jedi and Imperial Knight on Coruscant is now cut off from the Force. We

believe this virus is tailor-made to cripple our midi-chlorians without killing them, or us.”

It was staggering; over half the reformed Jedi Order was on that world. Most of the Imperial Knights were stationed there. Azyl'n said, “*Nearly* everyone, Empress? Is anyone immune?”

Marasiah swallowed. “I alone am unaffected. I can’t tell you why. No one knows.”

“Is someone working on a cure?”

“Our doctors haven’t pinpointed the virus itself yet,” the empress shook her head. “We have the best scientists and healers looking into this, I assure you, but we don’t know as much about midi-chlorians as we should. It may be... some time before a cure is found.”

Her words said *some time*, her tone said *never*. Everything he’d feared before had come to pass. Shado felt empty inside, bleak as an airless moon.

“Empress... I’ve been infected too,” he creaked. “Just now, before you called. I felt the headache, and the fever. I tried to meditate, but the Force... it refuses to speak to me.”

“Your symptoms,” she said, “are typical.”

As emptiness threatened to swallow him, he struggled for hope. “But... maybe others are immune. Azlyn, you’ve been with Ganner since he came back but nothing’s happened to you yet.”

He looked into her eyes, praying for salvation. Instead they’d gone as empty as his heart.

“No,” she whispered. “It happened to me this morning.”

Everything inside him collapsed. His head lowered and he sunk into the chair. All strength left him; he felt like he would never rise again.

“I expected as much,” Marasiah whispered. “I’m so sorry. I’m sorry for us all.”

## Chapter Sixteen

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Oranessen was a scarred, dreary pit of a planet, just as Morrigan had expected. The data she'd received from Paxo Rovless told her exactly where to find Nial Qorlis, and once their ship set down in port, she and Gunner set across the city to the site of his apparent office. After being cooped up together in the same spaceship for three days they were eager for space and outside air, even if they couldn't call Oranessen's 'fresh.'

They made their way through the city without talking. For once it not a tense silence between them; each had sunk into her own thoughts and neither wanted intrusion. Five hours before reaching Oranessen, they'd received a communication from Marasiah Fel herself. The empress had explained to them both that the Jedi and Imperial Knights on Coruscant had lost the ability to use the Force. It was suspected that an artificial virus had severed them from their powers, which meant that Force-users across the galaxy were in danger. It was, therefore, vitally important that they track down those responsible.

The revelation had settled heavy on Gunner. She no longer complained that she should have been flying with Skull Squadron; instead she'd asked her mother questions about Qorlis and Maladi. She was still in soldier mode, probing for information and weaknesses on the enemy, but at least she finally respected the severity of the situation. That was slight balm to Morrigan; mostly, she was worried about Cade. It was a struggle to keep her attention on the task ahead.

When they reached the ferrocrete tower block where Qorlis was supposedly based, Morrigan immediately noticed a single landspeeder with police markings parked outside the building. Sensing something had gone wrong and mentally bracing herself for anything, she hurried into the tower's main entrance.

When she enquired about Qorlis' company, the security officer at the front desk told her all she wanted to know. "Something *really* strange happened up there, day before last," the man said. "That whole office got shot up. Totally blasted. The office manager, he got killed. His neck-" He made a twisting motion with his own. "Police have got it all locked down, but I saw them taking cut-up droid parts out. *Battle* droids."

"What about Qorlis himself?"

"I'm not sure, Miss. I'm sorry, he hasn't been back, I don't think."

Morrigan had a sinking feeling that someone had already gotten to their target. "Who was responsible for shooting up the place? The droids?"

"I'm not sure," the guard admitted. "It's strange. No one really knows what happened in there-"

"You have to have a log of who visited this building." She placed a hand on the countertop.

The guard looked away awkwardly. "I was on shift the whole time. Nobody I didn't already know came through the doors. I told the police that. They believed me. I think."

"What about those?" Gunner jabbed a finger at the holocam peering at them from the upper corner of the room.

"Nobody strange on those either. It's like there was a..." He looked shiftily around the empty foyer and dropped his voice conspiratorially. "Jedi or something."

"Or something?" asked Gunner.

"I don't know. There's those- what do you call them?"

"Sith," Morrigan provided.

"Yeah. Maybe those, I don't know." The guard blinked as his mind caught up to his mouth. "Say, what did you want to see Mister Qorlis for?"

Morrigan ignored the question. "Are the police still there?"

"The whole room's sealed off," said the guard. "They've got one watchman there now. If you want to talk to the detective in charge of the case, I've got his information."

"We'll check upstairs first," Morrigan said, and walked briskly to the elevator.

As they rode it up to the eight floor, Gunner asked, "Do you think our friend on Abregado-Rae tipped him off?"

"My instinct says no. Qorlis wasn't that valuable to Paxo. And if he *did* tip him off, that doesn't explain the firefight and the dead man."

"I know. I think something else is going on here."

"I don't like it."

"There's no reason you should."

"Do you think it would be Sith, coming to silence him?"

"It's possible, but I don't understand how it could get to messy."

The lift shuddered to a halt and the doors opened. Morrigan and Gunner walked briskly down the hallway. Even from the far end they could see the blaster-marks scorching the wall around the office door, and the yellow police caution tape marking off the scene.

When they reached the room itself the door was still open; probably it had been jammed into position during the fight. When Morrigan peered through the threshold she saw an office space still strewn with overturned desks and marked by laser blasts. Seated in the far corner, slouching in his chair with his arms crossed and head bent low, a man in police clothes was drowsing.

Gunner looked to her mother, wondering whether they should try to work around him. Instead Morrigan cleared her throat loudly. The policeman almost fell out of his chair as he jerked awake. The man awkwardly said, "No gawking, ladies. Move along."

"We'd like to talk about what happened here," said Morrigan, leaning lightly into the tape that barred the doorway.

The officer stood up and shuffled toward them. "Sorry, but this is part of an ongoing police investigation. I can't talk about it."

"We heard there was a murder."



The policeman grunted. "That's why I've got to keep the crime scene secure."

"We heard a couple battle droids were part of the fight," Gunner added. "Whose side were they on?"

"That guard downstairs has been running his mouth again, hasn't he?"

Morrigan smiled tightly. "We'd like to take a closer look at the scene."

"I'm sorry, I really can't let you do that."

The policeman was losing his torpor and gaining his spine. It was a bad sign. Morrigan would rather not have to go to the detective on the case; it would drag them into local bureaucracy and worse, slow them down. If Qorlis was still alive he was likely in danger, and they had to find him before his other hunters did.

To her surprise- and the cop's- Gunner took the initiative. The younger woman shouldered past her mother, leaned against the caution tape, and said, "Officer, do you know who I am?"

The policeman blinked. "I... um.... Should I?"

"My name is Commander Gunner Yage, Skull Squadron, leader of the most decorated fighter unit in the Galactic Federation," she proclaimed, superbly martial and commanding. Rulf would have been proud. After rattling off her service number and, for good measure, the commendations she'd received, Gunner said, "I am here on detached service on personal order of Empress Marasiah Fel herself and I have been tasked to find and capture Mister Nial Qorlis. You *will* comply with my investigation or you will be held in contempt of the Galactic Federation triumvirate itself. Is that understood?"

The policemen stared. His hands twitched at his side. Finally, he came to the door and peeled away the caution tape. "I don't know what you're looking to find here, ah, Commander Yage," he flustered. "The detectives already took away the body, and the droids-"

"Why were there battle droids here?" Gunner asked while Morrigan surveyed the room. Laserfire had splattered against all the walls, the floor, even the ceiling. It didn't look like someone had run in here strafing. Rather, the dispersion

range was more appropriate for someone deflecting bolts with a lightsaber.

"We, ah, believe the droids were inside the room before the fighting started," the policeman said.

"How many attackers?" Morrigan asked.

"We're not sure."

"How was the dead man killed?"

"A broken neck. Snapped, hard."

The security guard hadn't been exaggerating, then. "Did the body have any other markings? Any other wounds?"

The cop shrugged. "You'll have to ask the detective, I really can't say."

"What about the droids? Were they shot up or cut up?"

He bit his lip. "I heard cut up."

Sith, most likely. Morrigan glanced at Gunner; her daughter's face was grim. She told the cop, "Please go in the hallway while we search the site. We'll let you know when you can come back in."

The cop hesitated and stayed where he was. Gunner drew her brows together and asked, "Do I need to take this to my superiors, officer?"

No, no," the cop wilted. "I'll be right outside."

Once he'd cleared the room Morrigan favored her daughter with a faint smile. "A little more blunt than I'd do it, but still effective. I approve."

"That means so much to me," Gunner said, not as sarcastic as she might have. "Do we know what we're looking for?"

Morrigan shook her head and looked around the office space. The bodies and wreckage had been cleared out, but many of its record files and datacards remained on the shelves. Morrigan doubted she'd find a map to Maladi's secret hideaway here, but there might have been something else. A man like Qorlis dabbled in the legal, the illegal, and the insidious all at the same time. Hopefully he'd gotten a little sloppy.

"Let's pick a spot and get started," Morrigan said. "We just might get lucky."

They were back to waiting again, and Eli hated it. Though they'd stuck a tracking device on Nial Qorlis' ship, actually

tailing him was not simple. There was no point in chasing a vessel into hyperspace unless you knew its destination; otherwise it might drop out of lightspeed and change course so fast your ship would overshoot it by entire parsecs, forcing you to stop, backtrack, and adjust course. So instead they had to wait, watch the signal from the tracking device, and see where Qorlis emerged into realspace before giving pursuit.

It was too easy for Eli to start replaying his actions on Orannessen in his head, cursing himself for missteps. If he'd been more observant, if he'd been faster, if he'd had more powerful command of the Force, this hunt could be over now. Darth Talon surprisingly failed to reprimand him, and as they waited she ended up locked in private communication with Darth Nihl, leaving Eli to deal with his emotions on his own.

He fell back on his usual method of killing anxious hours: training with the remotes. The main hold of their ship had just enough room to freely battle five spherical devices. Eli followed the familiar pattern of placing them in a circle on the deck, sitting down in the center, wrapping a blinding bandana around his eyes, and taking a few minutes for meditation before commencing the exercise.

It felt different this time. He'd gotten a faint headache that had mounted over the past hour. It seemed to be fading just a little, but his body felt warm and weak, as though slightly fevered. A Sith was not constrained by the limits of his body; Eli told himself that as he sat on the deck, cross-legged and back-straight, and tried to draw the Force's invisible power.

He was able to do so, though with greater difficulty than expected. It took more concentration, more willpower, to gather the Force inside him. When he was finally confident he'd done so, he reached outward and felt the five cold metal remotes resting around him. He drew a deep breath, gripped his lightsaber tight, and said, "Begin."

He jumped to his feet. The remotes kicked off the deck and began moving in complex, unpredictable circles around him. Eli heard their faint electric whine, heard them softly rend the air, but he had a hard time tracking their movements. The Force came to him and told him where to block the first shot, from a remote on his right. He knew to block another on the

left, but the tang of laserfire from behind caught him off-guard and he barely skipped ahead of a shot aimed at his leg. The next came from behind and took him in the shoulder.

Stinging pain filled his body. Anger gave Eli some strength; he spun around and deflected that remote's next blast, and the one from his right flank, but a shot came from the left he wasn't expecting at all. Another laser took him in the hip, thankfully less powerful than the last, but his body still doubled forward in pain.

The remoted whirled faster around him. He could hear them, but when he tried to mark their locations the Force availed him of nothing. He heard another shot go off, in front of him and low, and though he tried to skip back the shot took the edge of his boot. His toes stung and he smelled burnt leather.

The exercise was getting truly dangerous. Focusing on his anger and nothing else, Eli tried to raise a wall of Force energy and push these remotes away. Nothing happened at all. He pulled the bandana off just in time to see the remote on his left fire off a shot. He shifted instinctively to block it with his lightsaber, but even as he saw it coming he was too slow to stop the laser from taking him in the gut.

Keeled over in pain, Eli barely managed to wheeze out, "Stop! Now!"

The remotes froze in the air around him. Eli tried to spread the pain through his body, weaken and dissolve it like the Jedi had taught him, but nothing happened. Gritting his teeth, relying solely on willpower, Eli forced himself to stand straight. He focused on the remote hovering directly in front of him and tried to grab hold of it with his mind. He tried to nudge it, just a little bit, but it hung immobile in the air.

Nothing made sense. He looked at his hands, flexed them. They were real. He was real. He reached out and touched the remote's hard metal case, faintly warm from the inside. All of this was real.

He let go of the remote and tried to move it with the Force again, but nothing happened. He called for its power, but the Force would not answer.

This was impossible, but it was real. The Force had left him, suddenly and for no apparent reason. For a moment he

was overcome with paralyzing fear; then he found the Sith's antidote to fear, which was rage.

He grabbed the remote, dropped to his knees, and slammed the thing into the deck. Metal smashed against metal. He pounded the remote again, hard enough to crack open its metal case. Another hit, and its circuit-boards and wiring spilled across the floor. With every crash of metal on metal his hand hurt, and he tried to focus on that pain, cherish it, even if he couldn't draw strength from it like he had just an hour ago.

When the remote was truly destroyed, his hand cut and bleeding, Eli reared up, grabbed his lightsaber, and ignited it. The weightless blade had never felt so strange in his hand. When he swung at another remote he used too much strength and the weapon nearly flew from his hand. The remote, at least, split into two smoking halves that clattered to the ground. Eli spun on another remote, swung at it just as hard-

-and missed. Panicked and panting he stared at the remote right in front of him, switched the lightsaber to a steadier two-handed grip, and attacked again. It was slower, more controlled despite his pent-up anger needing release. This time he cut the remote apart, but it gave no satisfaction.

A voice from behind him said, "Apprentice, what are you doing?"

Eli spun around to see Darth Talon standing in the doorway, expression as inscrutable as ever. He lowered the lightsaber to his side and said, "Master... I... I cannot find the Force. It's left me."

Her face stayed stiff but something appeared in her eyes, something he'd never seen there before. "Explain. When did this happen?"

"Just in the past hour. I felt this slight headache, and a fever, and then I tried the exercises..." He waved a weak hand at the two remotes still hovering patiently. "At first I could still feel them, Master, but then... I went blind. Deaf. I can't feel them in the Force." His voice grew strained in realization. "I can't feel *you*."

Talon closed her eyes and took a deep breath. When she opened them that strange look remained. "It's started, then."

"What do you mean?"

"I've just finished with Lord Nihl. He says that every Sith on Saijo has lost contact with the Force, just as you."

Eli stared. "All of them?"

"The symptoms are the same."

"What do you mean, symptoms?"

"Nihl and Havok have a theory, a believable one. They think it is an airborne virus, engineered and transferred to us via the host in that escape pod."

Through layers of shock, Eli tried to understand. A virus needed a living host to transfer to fresh bodies; that would explain why that man in the pod had been kept alive for his journey, then killed as soon as he delivered the pathogens inside him. Yet it still made no sense; if this disease was engineered by Maladi or Saarai, why would she harm her own people?

"Our spies on Coruscant report unusual activity among the Jedi and Imperial Knights," Talon added. "None have been seen in public for the past three days, including the empress."

"Then they're... infected too?"

"Perhaps."

Eli couldn't handle any of it. The Force had been a part of his life for as long as he could remember. His father had taught him to feel it like a sixth sense, as natural as sight or touch. As Jedi and as Sith, it had been a natural component of his self. It was impossible that it could just go silent, like a holo-projector being switched off.

Another realization struck Eli's addled mind. He looked at Talon and asked, "Master... Have *you* lost the Force?"

"No," she said. "Not yet." And he recognized, finally, the strange look in her eyes, the thing he'd never seen before. Darth Talon was terrified.

"Qorlis," Eli rasped. "We must find Qorlis."

Talon nodded, but the fear remained. There was no telling where Qorlis would lead them or how he'd defend himself. With the dark side of the Force as their ally, Eli had never doubted he and Talon could fight through whatever was thrown in their way. Without the Force, without the sixth sense he'd relied on all his life, he could barely handle these mindless remotes. His power was gone, his confidence and

his skill. All he had was confusion and anger, and for once there was no power to be drawn from rage.

Now, nothing was certain.

Maybe they'd gotten lucky when searching the remains of Nial Qorlis' office, or maybe they were on a fool's errand. After giving some salvaged datacards a quick read it became clear that Qorlis owned another facility located off of Orannessen. This site was on Ord Vaxal, another half-empty, mostly-lawless planet on the edge of Hutt Space, under the great slugs' influence but not in their domain proper. From the material Morrigan and Gunner found, it seemed like Qorlis was using this place as a storage area and workshop for industrial-grade mechanical projects, whereas the office on Orannessen handled finances and clerical work. If he was being chased, it might be the place he'd run to.

The only way to find out was to go there. They could have gone to speak with the police detective investigating the incident, but Morrigan decided against it. It was unlikely to yield anything new and they'd already wasted too much time. She and Gunner went straight back to the ship, kicked off from the spaceport, and began their journey to Ord Vaxal.

Before leaving Morrigan had copied a few of Qorlis' datafiles and outright pocketed a few more. Once they were in space and en route to Ord Vaxal she tasked her daughter with the job of searching through them for any more helpful information. The fighter pilot made no complaint about such tedious work; she'd thrown herself into the mission now, and was determined to do everything in her power to see it through.

Morrigan was glad for that. She didn't expect those datacards to yield much; Gunner might find surprises, but her mother had a different goal in giving them to her. After four hours of shifting through financial records and supply lists Gunner could barely keep herself awake. Morrigan set the internal lights low and told her to go back to her cabin and get some sleep.

Gunner didn't argue. Morrigan remained in the main hold, lazily looking over Qorlis' data, listening as her daughter changed clothes, used the refresher, and shut herself off in

the cramped closet that served as private bunk-space. Morrigan waited, and after five more minutes of silence, she left the hold and went to the cockpit.

Hyperspace rolled endlessly outside the viewport. Morrigan sat down at the co-pilot's seat, turned on the comm system, and began typing in a long alpha-numeric encryption key. She'd committing it to memory more than half a lifetime ago. It had been known to her and Kol Skywalker alone, and they'd used it to communicate across lightyears on their joint missions. That had been before Cade, before the Sith. Before greed and ambition had gotten the better of her and she'd decided she'd rather be Nyna Calixte.

After she'd left Kol to raise their son alone on Ossus, they'd used this encryption code only a few more times. She remembered the last one vividly. The Sith-Imperial War was almost over, and the Alliance was about to be snared in a trap set at Caamas. She- Morrigan Core, Nyna Calixte- had called to warn Kol of the impending Sith feint at Coruscant. It had endangered the Empire's plans to end the war, but that had been less important to her than ensuring Kol's survival.

He hadn't been grateful for the news. The conversation had devolved into an exchange of recriminations. At the end Kol had said to her, *I thought you were a better woman than you are*. She'd never heard him so bitter.

That was the last time they'd spoke. A few days afterward, the Sith attacked Ossus. Morrigan hadn't foreseen that, though she should have. Kol had died there, and for a long time she'd thought Cade dead too. She'd learned to live with it, and even accept that she'd be only Nyna Calixte and never again Morrigan Corde. Then Cade had come crashing into her life, into everyone's lives, and nothing could be the same after that.

She'd shared this encryption code with Cade in their last exchange two years ago, right after he'd apparently died with Darth Krayt. Morrigan entered it in its entirety and tapped the final button to cast her hail across the stars.

She had to wait. Tension mounted inside her; her heart beat faster and her breath grew tight. Finally, after a few interminable minutes, the console's holo-projector came to life. She found herself looking at a head framed by messy



blond hair, cocked thoughtfully as it stared across light-years at her own projected image.

Quietly she said, "Hello, Cade."

Cade looked at her thoughtfully for a while before he simply said, "Hey, Mom."

"I'm glad you're all right." She kicked herself. "*Are* you all right, Cade?"

"I'm doing pretty good," he said, tone guarded. "Me, Jariah, and Blue just came into a big score. Real big."

"So you're still together then."

"Wouldn't be any other way."

It was true. For Cade, Syn and Blue were more than just crewmates. They were family, and after all they'd been through- good and bad, trivial and catastrophic- they were as close as any blood relatives could be. Morrigan wondered what it would be like to have even one person trust her like that.

Cade picked up her pause by saying, "I'm kinda surprised to see you, Mom. I heard you were... under arrest. Or something."

"I was. But I've been released, on the empress' order."

"That's... pretty generous of her."

"It wasn't. Cade, she sent me on a mission."

She watched his face turn serious. "What kind of mission?"

"I'll make it simple. Something major's happened on Coruscant. All the Jedi and all the Imperial Knights there have lost their ability to feel the Force."

She watched his jaw hinge open. "What does *that* mean?" he asked huskily.

"It means they've gone deaf to it. Everyone except the empress herself. She can still use the Force the same as ever. Don't ask me why. She doesn't know. She thinks it's being spread by an artificial virus, and if the virus is loose on Coruscant--"

"It's loose everywhere," Cade muttered. "Stang... Are you serious? This isn't some karking joke?"

"I've *never* joked with you. The empress is trying to stifle the news. If this gets out--"

"Yeah, I get it." Cade ran a hand through his hair and stared off into nothing.

"Cade," she whispered, "Can *you* still use the Force?"

He closed his eyes, the way Kol did when he was trying to summon the power inside him. Then he looked at his mother and said, "Yeah. I'm still okay."

"Over the past few weeks... Have you been..."

"I've been around," he grunted. "Listen, Mom, I still don't get what *you're* doing in this."

"The empress wants me to find those responsible. She's set me after the trail of the Sith. She figured I'd have contacts her intel people wouldn't. She was right."

"Stang, that don't make sense," Cade hissed. "If this thing is taking away the Force, why would the Sith be spreading it?"

"I assume because they've found an antidote. If they have, the Jedi and Imperial Knights are going to need it."

"Okay, yeah, I get that." Cade swallowed. "Maladi?"

"I'm working on that assumption."

"Yeah. Can't figure anyone else could cook up something like that. Assuming it *is* the Sith..."

"And if it's not," Morrigan added, "They're just as vulnerable as anyone else."

Cade nodded, face furrowed in concern. For all his claims not to care about his Jedi heritage, she knew it was bluster. The possibility of the Order going extinct, or of losing his own Force powers, had shaken him in a way Morrigan herself could never understand.

"Listen, Mom," he said, "If you need help—"

"I have help. Your half-sister, actually."

"Really?" His face screwed up. Their first encounter on Tatooine had been less than amicable.

"Yes. It turns out the empress has a twisted sense of humor."

"So you're just calling to warn me?"

"That's right. For now."

"For now," he echoed. "Listen, if you think this is gonna get serious, or if you get in trouble, you call me. Got it?"

"I will."

"Promise, Mom."

She was honestly touched. "I promise."

"Good." He paused, unable to think of anything else to say.

Morrigan had something. “Goodbye, Cade. I hope the Force is with you. Now and always.”

He nodded grimly. “Thanks. So do I.”

She closed the link, leaving the cockpit lit only by flashing hyperspace-glow. Morrigan took a deep breath, then went into the comm system’s call logs and deleted her last conversation. Then, finally, she stood up, stretched, and went back to the cabins. They’d reach Ord Vaxal tomorrow. She needed to be rested and ready.

## Chapter Seventeen

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When the chime in her room sounded and Guri's smooth voice announced via intercom that repairs had finally been completed on Sleepy, Kyra should have felt more excited than she did. Jao Assam's revelations to her two days previous had knocked everything out of order. After escaping from Socorro the galaxy had seemed vast but at least knowable. Now it felt like something else altogether.

She'd gone back to Jao the following day, asking more. She'd wanted to know what it felt like the touch the Force, whether it was a thing that she could use or whether it used her. Jao's answers had been ambivalent, but he promised that in learning the ways of the Force she would open up potential within herself that she'd never imagined. And he'd insisted that, if she were willing, he could start to teach her its ways.

Kyra had refrained from giving an answer. Even with what he'd said she felt she didn't understand any of it, and she was stuck ruminating on unknown possibilities, so different from the trial-and-error tinkering that could solve any mechanical problem. The call from Guri was more a welcome distraction than anything.

Still, as she joined the others in the lobby outside the Thrumble Foundation's operations wing, she felt old enthusiasm return. It was the first time everyone had been together since they'd arrived days before: Sauk and AG-37, Jao and Ania (standing, she noticed, awkwardly apart), Deliah and Jariah, even Cade Skywalker, whose stout

astromech seemed to rattle on its rolling legs, tense with anticipation.

When Guri appeared, she had on a technician's white labcoat and a very human smile, professionally polite but personally enthusiastic. "I'm glad you could all make it," she told the group, and opened the door behind her wide. "Right this way, please."

With a nudge from Ania, Kyra went to the front of the line. She was right behind Guri as the so-human droid walked down the plain white hall until she reached the double-doors on the far end. They opened for her, revealing the laboratory beyond. Racks on the walls were filled with tools she couldn't name, but they all seemed arranged in neat order. Two different barrel-shaped, many-armed mechanic droids wheeled to the edges of the room so the newcomers could get a look at what had once been Kyra's broken mechanical friend.

The droid stood upright, plugged into a series of sockets in the wall, and he'd been much improved. Sleepy's gold-metal head and torso had been scrubbed clean of accumulated dirt and polished to shine. His missing left arm had been replaced with one that matched the right perfectly, and a set of human-like hips and legs had been attached. Right now his eyes were dim. He looked like he could have some straight from the factory.

R2-D2 whistled enthusiastically and Guri's smile widened. "Yes, we've run full diagnostic tests. All his primary functions are operable. We've also updated several key programming subroutines to be up to current specifications, including this translation system."

"What about his memory core?" asked AG-37. The tall assassin droid stood at the back of the group but had no problem seeing over everyone else's heads.

"This droid has suffered at least one complete memory wipe since inception. I'm afraid we weren't able to recover anything before that, but for post-wipe memories we've attained a restoration of approximately seventy-two percent."

"How long ago was that memory wipe?" asked Kyra.

"Nearly one-hundred and sixty standard years," Guri said.

Jariah snorted, Ania whistled, and Cade laughed once. Kyra had never imagined she'd latch onto such an extraordinary droid. She was starting to wonder if that invisible, powerful Force really had been moving her all along.

"Where did you get all the materials?" Sauk asked. "I can't even tell which parts are replacements."

"We have a wide catalog of droid parts kept beneath the facility. This model was relatively common when the Thrumble Memorial Foundation was established."

"And this place was founded by *you*, right?" asked Jariah.

"I'd developed an interest in artificial cognition," Guri said wryly. "But that's beside the point. I believe we're ready to do a complete start of this droid's functions."

"Please," Kyra said. Looking at that shiny, pretty golden droid had made her eager again and pushed the past days' confusion from her mind.

Guri touched a few buttons on the side of the wall socket. Kyra heard magnetic clamps release and saw the droid's photoreceptors light up. The body tipped away from the wall, then stiffened under its own power and took its first few shuffling steps toward the middle of the room.

"Greetings," the droid said. "I am See-Threepio, human-cyborg relations." That voice was strong and clear like Kyra had never heard, but she could still recognize its tinny tone and upper-class accent.

R2-D2 whistled joyously and forced his way through the crowd. The protocol droid said with a touch of awe, "Artoo-Deetoo? It is you! Well, this is quite unexpected." As the astromech began wheeling happy circles around two golden legs, C-3PO added, "Well, you don't need to be *that* excited, Artoo. I've missed you too, naturally, but it's not as though—"

Artoo interrupted him with a series of blurts and squeals.

"What is that?" said C-3PO. "Ninety years since we've last seen each other? Why, that's quite ridiculous. You've clearly been malfunctioning. Perhaps your cortical node needs an inspection. You bring it on yourself, you know, with your incessant adventuring."

As R2-D2 stopped in front of C-3PO and continued to bleat protests, Guri said, "I'm afraid he's right. You've been deactivated for a long time."

C-3PO turned his photoreceptors on the human replica droid. Their lights flickered for a second, and Kyra was afraid he'd suffered a malfunction, but he said, "Mistress Guri? Late of service to Prince Xizor of Black Sun? Yes, that is you. I'm certain of it. I never forget a face, after all."

"Mistress Guri is responsible for you being with us now," said AG-37.

C-3PO pivoted to look at the assassin droid. "Goodness. And are you not... A-gee-Thirtyseven?"

"I am glad to see your memory is properly restored, See-Threepio."

"This is weirdest family reunion I've been to," Skywalker muttered. "And that says a lot."

"Oh, this is not a family reunion," C-3PO started, only to be interrupted by rude noises from R2-D2. "Oh, all right, you sentimentalist. It is, perhaps, a family reunion of sorts between myself and Artoo-Deetoo, if one must borrow organiform similes to describe our relations. My contacts with Mistress Guri and A-gee-Thirtyseven were much more brief, though as I have said, I never forget a face. Well, not unless my memory core has been damaged."

Kyra swallowed something in her throat and asked, "So you remember *me*, Sleepy?"

The shiny gold droid looked at her and raised his arms. "Oh, yes. Mistress Kyra. I remember you most well."

She felt weak with relief. "So you remember our time on Socorro?"

"Socorro? Is that where that unpleasant place was? I see. That is good to know. Though my memory engrams from that period are intact, my core processor was functioning suboptimally... I'm afraid I am not fully aware of all the events that transpired in that time... but I do remember you, Mistress Kyra. Rest assured of that."

Kyra felt lightheaded with unexpected happiness. "That's good to know...Threepio."

R2-D2 tooted a question, and C-3PO said, "Now that you mentioned it, I'm not entirely certain when I suffered that damage to my core processor... My memory from that period seems to be blank. What's that? When did I last see Master Luke? I'm sure it wasn't that long ago..."

“Luke?” asked Deliah. Cade had gone stiff beside her. “As in Luke Skywalker?”

“Of course, Mistress, ah-”

“Call me Deliah Blue, darling.” She draped a bare pink arm over Cade’s shoulders. “This scruffy *murglack* here is Cade Skywalker.”

The stunned look on Cade’s faced relaxed to a grin. “Pleased to meet ya, See-Threepio.”

R2-D2 whistled something else, and C-3PO said, “Oh, I see what you’re doing now Artoo. Well your joke won’t work. That unkempt young man could hardly be a relation to Master Luke.”

R2-D2 tweeted insistently and AG-37 said, “See-Threepio, in the short time we knew each other, did I ever strike you as the kind to tell jokes?”

“Quite the contrary,” C-3PO told the assassin droid.

“Then you will trust what I say next.” AG-37 took two clanking steps forward and laid a metal hand on Ania’s shoulder. “This is Miss Ania Solo.”

C-3PO’s photoreceptors flickered again. “Oh. Oh dear. Are you... quite certain?”

“That’s my name,” Ania said. “I don’t get it. A-gee, what’s going on?”

“It is rather complicated,” the assassin droid said.

“Oh dear. Oh dear.” C-3PO warbled. “So it appears that Master Cade and Mistress Ania are relatives.”

“We’re *what*?” Ania and Cade said in perfect unison.

They spun on each other and stared. After total silence filled the room, Deliah jabbed Cade in the side and said, “You’re right, *mesh’la*. This *is* a weird family reunion.”

“No,” Ania insisted. “You’re a Skywalker. Big famous Jedi family. Luke, Ben, Kol. Everyone’s heard of them. I’m just...” She trailed off as some private realization struck her. “Ah, *stang*. Stang, mom, what did you run from?”

Jariah exhaled and said, “Okay, I’m well and truly confused. Can someone please explain this to people who *aren’t* two hundred years old?”

“This is all very confusing to me as well, Master-” Threepio paused.

“Jariah.”



“Master Jariah, thank you. If Artoo-Detoo is not exaggerating or playing a juvenile trick- and I assure you he’s quite capable- then Master Cade and Mistress Ania would share the same ancestor... five generations back.”

“Is that all?” Cade exhaled. “I thought you were gonna say we’re long-last half-siblings or something. I already have one of those and one’s enough.”

Jao looked between them both. “I still don’t get this. If Ania’s related to the Skywalkers, why can’t you use the Force?”

R2-D2 released a series of tweets, and C-3PO said, “Very correct, Artoo. Force-sensitivity is not guaranteed to pass from one generation to the next, though it is more likely.”

Jao looked at Ania like he was seeing her anew. “Do you know anything like that in your family?”

“I don’t know.” Ania hugged herself tight. “My mother was Marin Solo. I don’t... I don’t think she always went by that name, though.”

“You said you were cousins with the empress,” Sauk said.

“I thought I was. Somehow. I wasn’t clear. Mom didn’t like to talk about... what she was.”

“How fascinating.” C-3PO sounded like a professor at a symposium. “So you do not know the identity of your maternal great-grandparents? By calculations it must have been either Master Jacen or Mistress Jaina.” He nodded to Cade. “The nephew and niece of Luke Skywalker, your lauded ancestor and my dear friend.”

Cade’s response was a curt nod. He was clearly trying to process this too, even if he wasn’t quite as frazzled as Ania.

As for Kyra, who’d instigated this reunion and never known what it could lead to, she watched with a curious sense of detachment. The sheer unlikelihood of it all seemed to her a thing of beauty, and so was the collision of emotions it elicited. Cade and Ania struggled with revelations that begged more questions. Jao and Jariah were looking at their friends in new ways. Sauk was curious; for him this was a puzzle to be solved. Deliah emanated a Zeltron’s sense of happy wonder.

Kyra knew all these things even though it wasn’t always clear on their faces. She simply found herself in tune, and she

wondered if this was what it felt like for Jao and Cade when the Force flowed through them.

In her confusion Ania seemed to huddle into herself. “Mom... I knew there were lots of things about her she didn’t talk about. I only met my grandfather, her dad, once. Right before the Imp attack that blew up my parent’s ship. I was with my grandfather when it happened. He rushed to get me out of there. Threw me into an escape pod right before the whole thing blew. And that old man... he could do things. I wondered if he was a Jedi or something. Not that I’d ever seen a Jedi before.” She sniffed. “He saved my life and I never even learned his name. That always bothered me.” Ania looked to AG-37. “Do you know? You seem to know all this other stuff about me that you haven’t told.”

AG-37’s photoreceptors pulsed slowly before he said, “I cannot claim to know your full lineage. Nor your grandfather.”

“But my great-great whatever?”

“I knew a Han Solo once. In a way he’s as much responsible for freeing me of my original programming as Mistress Guri. Before I met them I was solely an assassin droid, programmed to serve the criminals who’d purchased me. Through them, I was able to become so much more.”

The blond human replica droid, looking at Ania with a thoughtful expression, said, “I can see some of Han Solo in you, actually.”

“I thought the same,” added AG-37.

Ania spun back to the assassin droid. “So when you helped me out of that Imp prison... That was what? A debt?”

“In a manner of speaking.”

Ania cursed under her breath and stared at the floor. Kyra had no idea what to say; this little gathering had spiraled way beyond her, or the droid she’d called Sleepy.

When the silence became too tense C-3PO said, “I’m dreadfully sorry to have disturbed you, Mistress Ania.”

“It’s not your fault,” she said, and started for the exit. Kyra reached out and grabbed her sleeve. Ania stopped and gave a weak smile. “I just need to take a walk. I’ll be fine, really.” She looked back at the gleaming golden droid. “This is what you’ve been waiting for. Take your time and enjoy it.”

Kyra nodded and released her jacket. Ania walked briskly out the door, not looking at AG-37, Sauk, or Jao, who stared like he wanted to go after her, but when the doors slid shut he stayed planted where he was.

With Ania gone the room fell into awkward silence again. R2-D2 hooted mournfully, and C-3PO replied, "You're right, Artoo. I'd nearly forgotten that humans can be such confusing creatures."

Sometimes you just needed to walk it out. Ania wasn't even mad at AG-37, not really. When the assassin droid had helped her bust out of the Imperial prison camp on Drash-So and subsequently become a regular at her junk shop on Carrerras Minor, she hadn't looked at the situation as closely as she might have. Since she'd been a child, whisked about on her parents' freighter, she'd spent more time making friends with droids than with flesh-and-blood beings. Experiences on Drash-So had soured her to other people even more, and AG-37 had easily slipped into the position of a reliable friend.

She should have asked more questions, but that wasn't AG-37's fault. So he owed another Solo, some great-great-whatever-grandfather, a debt of gratitude. There was nothing wrong with that, but she didn't like the idea of bearing someone else's legacy. She'd known from a young age that her mother had been running from a legacy of her own, though the details had never been clear. After losing her parents at Torn Station, Ania had quietly accepted those mysteries would stay unsolved; moreover, they were irrelevant to her immediate needs. Quietly all of that- her mysterious mother, her maybe-Jedi grandfather, the Imperial monarch who was apparently her cousin- had started to feel like somebody else's life. That was one reason why she'd turned down the offer to become Marasiah Fel's bodyguard; it came from a legacy she didn't want.

Eventually Ania made her way back to the guest wing of the Thrumble Foundation complex. It was as nice as some Core-world resort hotel, nicer than any place Ania could remember staying at. First it had felt uncomfortable, and then it had felt nice. Now she felt pressed in by its beige walls and

soft carpet. She wanted to get back on *Free Agent* and soar away someplace, it didn't matter where. She'd still have to figure out how to treat AG-37 from now on, and she'd have to have another conversation with Jao about Kyra (she realized she'd spoken harshly there) but she could deal with that, once she was in space and feeling free again.

Ania stepped onto one of the balconies that looked out on Esseles' sprawling oceans. Night had fallen and darkness had swallowed the horizon, but when she went over to the edge she could see the complex's inner lights reflected on the water's shifting surface, hear the crash of waves on a far-below cliff, and smell the salty breeze. Leaning with her forearms on the railing, Ania closed her eyes, breathed deeply in and out, and emptied her mind.

She told herself all this didn't change anything. She still had her ship, her old friends and her new one, and an absurd amount of stolen wealth. She'd get through this revelation and go back to the life she'd had- the same life, only better. The past was only the past, and Ania Solo carried no one's legacy.

It was a pleasant thought, and she remained where she was for a while, savoring darkness, warm breeze, and crashing waves. She let them all wash over her for a while before she picked up something else: a steady high-pitched whining noise, barely audible beneath the sounds of waves. Her eyes popped open and she looked down but could make out nothing besides faint explosions of foam far below. That whining sound didn't go away, and as she listened it got louder; closer.

Ania picked her head up and tried to scan the blackness beyond. The nighttime ocean was invisible, the stars faint. She stared until she picked up something else in the sky: brief slips of light, like reflections moving across a smooth manufactured surface. The droning sound kept getting closer.

She didn't understand, but her instincts told her it was nothing good. Heart beating fast she started across the balcony. A new sound came behind her: something tearing through the air. She broke into a sprint and ran for the door without looking back. She slid through the portal and spun around once her boots hit the carpet: the doors remained

open as she watched three figures land hard on the balcony. All were encased in armor, one set silver, one set gold, and the other jet-black; all had the T-visor helmets that marked them instantly at Mandalorians.

Ania's hand went instinctively to her hip. No holster, no blaster. She swore, pounded the controls to the door, and forced them to close. Swearing again she pressed the button she thought would lock them, then sprinted for her room, where she'd kept her weapon. She didn't hear the doors open right away, but as she bounded down the hall a painful screeching noise sounded behind her. They were coming through.

Ania had no idea what Mandalorians were coming here for. Her first thought was that Rav had hired them, but Rav had no money, not anymore, and she had no idea how Rav would have tracked them to Esseles. It had to have been something else. Guri said she had all kinds of high-rolling clients and this must have had something to do with them.

When she reached the entrance to her room Ania tapped her code into the control panel. The door seemed to take forever to open; in the tense second's silence she heard boots pounding the hallway, getting louder.

They were coming after her. That made no sense. Ania had never even seen a Mandalorian until two minutes ago. But the boots were getting closer and she threw herself into her room. She tapped on the light near the nightstand, pulled her bag of personal belongings off the floor and threw it on the bed. Swearing again, cursing herself for letting her guard down and not having a weapon on her, Ania found the familiar handle of her blaster and gripped it tight.

She heard people behind the door and threw herself over to the far side of the bed, placing it between her and the door. She crouched to her knees, blaster resting on the bed-cushion, and waited for them to tear through. Every second counted; this place had to have good security and Guri's droids would be here any minute.

The door tore open with a scream of metal and burst of smoke. Ania couldn't see clearly but she fired anyway, blaster set on *kill*. She heard her bolts hit something metal, but no sounds of pain, and no one returned fire. She kept

shooting, desperately, madly, praying she could hold them off long enough.

Two figures shouldered into the room, gold armor and silver. The silver one was bigger and she concentrated fire on his chestplate but the bolts panged helplessly, barely slowing him down. Ania swore again and tried to hit him between armored plates, aiming for his neck and armpits, anything to do some damage.

Confused and terrified, Ania only saw the gold-plated one behind him draw a blaster right before a blue bolt popped out of the barrel. She tried to return fire, as futile as anything else. The stun bolt caught Ania in the left shoulder, spreading numbness through her body. With her last bit of energy she tried to raise her right arm and get off one more shot, but the silver one had his own gun hefted, and another stun blast erased her world.

No alarm sounded, but Jao knew that when Guri excused herself from the lab to take a call, something bad was happening. While R2-D2 and C-3PO continued their double-act, Jao slipped through the door and found Guri in the hall outside, speaking into her handheld comlink.

“Try to contain them,” she was saying. “And find how they got in. Look for a ship outside. Check heat signatures.”

“What happened?” Jao asked.

Guri shut off the link and stuffed it into her pocket. “There’s been an incursion in the guest wing. Security cams show Mandalorians.”

“Ania?”

“We think she’s in the area but we’re not sure-”

Jao ran back into the laboratory. His panic was plain; all eyes and photoreceptors swung on him. “A-gee!” he called. “Ania’s in trouble! Let’s go!”

He knew that was all it would take. Jao ran back out and sprinted past Guri, retracing the path toward the guest wing. As he ran he reached instinctively for his lightsaber and realized that he’d left it in his room. He’d never thought they’d be in danger here.

As he panicked he heard that most desired sound: the snap and hiss of an ignited lightsaber. He looked back and saw not

only AG-37 running after him, but Guri and, astonishingly, Skywalker with a green blade humming in his fist.

"What are we looking at?" Skywalker barked.

"Mandalorians, three of them." Guri said, without hint of exertion. It was the first outward sign Jao'd seen that she wasn't human.

"What'd you guys do to get karking Mandos on your butts?"

"We've never run into them before," Jao said as they reached the entrance to the guest wing. "Maybe they're after *you*."

He heard the sound of blasterfire down one hallway and immediately ran for it, even though he had no weapon in hand. He only slowed when he saw the backs of two silver security droids shooting at a target down the hall.

Guri grabbed his shoulder, stopped him completely, and said, "The droids have contained the intruders for now."

"They've blocked the way to my room. I need a weapon."

"Reinforcements will bring you one."

"What about Ania?" He looked down the hall but still couldn't make out what the droids were firing at.

"Allow me to investigate," AG-37 said. The assassin droid never went anywhere unarmed, and he raised the blaster carbine slung across his chest and levelled it with two metal hands. He stomped ahead and Jao couldn't resist following, using the droid's bulk to shield himself from the stray shot coming from the far end of the hall.

Once they got close to the two other droids, Jao sidestepped out and peered between their metal shoulders. He spotted one Mandalorian in gold armor, using a doorframe for cover and shooting back with two blaster pistols. Then he saw a second, larger and in armor mostly black, with a few gold stripes and a visor like a down-pointed triangle instead of T-shaped.

The black Mando hefted some heavy rifle in his hands, a design Jao didn't recognize. AG-37 sprayed carbine-fire down the hall, taking the Mando in the chest but not blowing him over. The rifle went off, releasing not a standard energy blast but a fist-sized projectile that went between the heads

of the two security droids and impacted in the center of AG-37's torso.

An electric storm burst across AG-37's body. Jao jumped back as his heavy form staggered and tilted; when the electricity died he toppled like a cut tree and crashed thunderously to the floor. His twin photoreceptors stared at the ceiling, dark.

It was no weapon Jao had ever seen, like a portable rocket launcher but armed with ion-based charges. It was the sort of thing that could only be useful for taking down droids, which meant that these Mandos had done their homework before coming here.

The weapon also reloaded fast; a second projectile shot out and caught another of Guri's security droids, dropping it after a brief flare of electric emission. The black-armored Mando didn't bother to adjust aim to the last droid standing; the gold-armored one charged ahead and riddled the metal torso with dual-fisted laserfire. Black armor threw down his heavy launcher, replaced it with a standard BlasTech rifle, and charged.

Jao was acutely aware he had no weapons. He ducked over a spray of laserfire and tried to tug AG-37's rifle free, but it was grasped vice-tight by dead metal hands. He looked back at the Mandos and saw all three of them running toward him: black, gold, and a big silver one in the back, with Ania slung limp over one shoulder.

He had no weapons, but he had the Force. Jao found concentration long enough to project a Force-blast that stopped their charge and knocked them off-balance without pushing them off their feet. As they recovered a figure bounded over Jao's crouched form, lightsaber in hand. Skywalker attacked the black-armored Mando with a flurry of blows, shearing off his blaster-barrel and smashing into forearms raised for defense, but his blade couldn't but through the Mando's metal plates. *Beskar*, it had to be.

At the same time gold and silver kept coming. Jao rose and threw himself at gold, barely avoiding a laser that sizzled past his ear. He went low and tackled the Mando, pulling them both to the ground. He heard a swear from inside the helmet- the voice sounded female- and tried to pin the



warrior to the ground. She was fast; her right leg snapped in and up. He deflected a knee aimed for his crotch by taking the impact in the thigh, still painful. The woman's upper body reared up and she lashed out with twin punches that he couldn't avoid. Through his pain he grabbed one wrist and twisted, almost to breaking, but she kneed him again, this time in the stomach.

As Jao curled in pain, the Mando rolled out from under him and snapped to her feet. She grabbed one of her pistols from the floor, spun, and shot at Cade, who was still trying to get through the black warrior's defenses. Cade barely pivoted in time to deflect the blast; it gave an opening for the closer combatant to land a punch on Cade's jaw.

The blond man staggered back but didn't drop his lightsaber. The black and gold Mandos ran ahead, and as he struggled to his feet Jao saw the big silver warrior engaged with Guri. He'd heard the human replica droid had once been an assassin; he watched her now as she pulled off hand-to-hand combat moves with speed and grace even an Imperial Knight would envy. She jabbed the edge of her hand beneath two chest-plates, into the silver Mando's ribs. He deflected her next blow with his armored forearm but Guri twisted her wrist around his, then grabbed onto the *beskar* plate and pulled, yanking the much larger man off-balance with seemingly little effort.

The silver Mando dropped Ania and tried to defend himself against the hail of punches. He warded off her fists but Guri swung around to his side and delivered a snap-kick that pounded the man's armor plates and forced out a grunting exhalation. Then she grabbed his arm, planted the same foot on his side, and yanked so hard even Jao could hear his shoulder dislocate.

That was when the black and gold Mandos opened fire. Guri had no weapons but her body and nothing to deflect them; scorching laser-blasts caught her in the arm, stomach, and torso, burning scorched holes through her skin.

Guri flinched, but remained standing and raised her fists to greet the Mandos. The gold-armored woman unleashed a wailing battle-cry and jumped toward her while the black one ducked low to scoop up Ania. Jao pushed himself to his feet

and ran after black and silver as they retreated down the hall; Skywalker ignited his lightsaber and went to help Guri with the gold Mando.

That woman had a surprise left; she let Guri get in close, absorbed two punched on her armor, then slapped a palm on Guri's shoulder, leaving a metal disc behind. Jao tried to shout warning, but electricity burst out from it, dancing across Guri's skin and smoking through her clothes. Guri staggered without falling, stunned but not disabled like AG-37. It still bought the Mando woman enough time to run ahead and joined her comrades.

Jao wanted to stop and pry that disc off Guri but his main concern was Ania. As he and Cade chased the retreating Mandos, the woman fired back as she ran, forcing Cade to slow and defend with his lightsaber. The Mandos suddenly made a hard right turn, through an blown-open set of doors, and Jao realized they were going out onto one of the balconies.

He and Cade raced outside in time to see the three Mandos hold tight to fibercables dangling from a vehicle overhead. He could hear the craft's whining repulsors but made out none of its shape; the matte-black hull was almost invisible in the night. Ania's limp body had been hooked into a harness, and as Jao raced to the balcony's edge all four of the bodies lifted away, reeled in by the black vehicle even as it began evasive maneuvers.

In desperation and anger, Jao reached out and tried to use the Force to stop its escape. He felt the ship he couldn't see and tried to reel it back in, and he felt Skywalker join him in the effort, but the vehicle was too far away, too strong. He felt it tear free of their grip and fly higher. Hands balled to fists; he pounded the balcony railing and opened his mouth to scream.

"Wait, Jao Assam," he heard a voice behind him, Guri's voice. He and Cade looked back and saw the artificial woman leaning against the bent doorframe as though exhausted. She clutched the comlink in her hand and tilted her chin up, toward the sky.

Jao looked back at the black to see a pair of lights swoop in from overhead. They moved on different trajectories but

seemed to be vectoring to the same target. Security drones, Jao thought, and when he heard the burst of projectile weapons he felt warring emotions surge- hope they might stop the Mandalorian evac vessel, fear they might kill Ania by accident.

A second later came the reply: two bursts of laserfire, quickly ended. Two explosions flared, and Jao watched helplessly as twin fireballs tumbled into the night-black ocean.

“What happened?” he gasped. “Did the Mandos get away?”

“One moment, please.” Guri staggered back inside and began talking into her comlink. She moved as though badly hurt; with those blaster-holes in her shirt a human would have been dead.

Cade went inside after her, and after a longing look at the night sky, Jao followed. He thought he felt Ania out there; she was no Force-sensitive but she still had a distinctive Force-aura, one he’d gotten to know very well over the past two years. He thought he still felt it, faint and getting fainter. It may have been desperate thinking. If he’d lost Ania forever he’d never forgive himself.

Moving fast with frustration and anger, Jao joined Cade and Guri inside the hall. The battered human replica droid said, “The security drones were shot down, but one was able to fire a homing device that attached to the craft’s hull.”

Jao’s heart surged. “Then we can track them?”

Guri nodded, face twisted in a very human wince.

“Those bucketheads were after *her*, and only *her*.” Skywalker breathed. “What would Mandos want with your *municheeka*?”

Jao didn’t bother to correct him. “I really don’t know. They’re mercenaries. Anyone could have hired them.”

They heard a clamor approaching down the hall and looked to see a group coming from the direction of the research wing: Kyra jogging up front, Sauk behind her, Jariah and Deliah trotting in the rear while R2-D2 and C-3PO trailed far behind. That golden protocol droid looked way better than when they’d found him, but he was still slow on his feet.

Kyra was breathless when she got up to them. “What happened? Where’s Ania?”

"Kidnapped," Cade growled. "By karking Mandos."

More calmly Guri said, "We've managed to place a tracker on their ship's hull. Hopefully they won't find it."

Sauk's eyes went extra-wide. He looked over Cade and Jao, then blaster-scarred Guri, then asked, "Where's A-gee?"

"Mandos shot him with some ion charge or something." Cade waved a hand in the direction of the fallen droid.

"Is he damaged? Can you repair him?"

"I will have to... examine the damage." Guri swayed on her feet and Cade put out a hand to steady her.

Kyra had only one concern. "What about Ania? We have to go after her!"

That *we*, Jao knew, was meant for the two of them. Ania meant something different to each, and in their different ways they both needed her back.

Sauk needed her too. He stepped in and said, "I can get *Free Agent* ready to fly. But what about A-gee?"

Guri said, "You can go after Ania. I will do what I can for A-gee."

He nodded, grateful. "Do what you can for yourself, too."

She nodded back. "Prepare your ship. I will have the tracking information patched to your computer."

"Thank you." Jao shifted his gaze to Cade Skywalker. He still didn't like the man, but he thought he was starting to trust him, which was what really mattered. "Thank you, too."

"Don't mention it," Skywalker grunted.

"Listen... We'll go after Ania and see where they're taking her. Stay with A-gee for now. When they fix him, call us. And if we need help—"

"*Mynock*! I'll be there."

"Thank you," Jao repeated, then looked to Kyra and Sauk. Their eyes were on him, expectant. When *Free Agent* ran missions it was always Ania or AG-37 calling the shots. Now everything was in his hands, and the stakes were higher than ever. Frankly, he felt a little sick.

At the very back of the group he heard a worried electronic whine, and C-3PO's response. "You know, Artoo, I'm starting to believe we're dealing with authentic Solos and Skywalkers after all. An hour after I've met them and they're already in trouble! Such an astonishing family."

At the sound of that voice Kyra turned around. Jao felt emotions conflict inside her as she looked at the golden droid: that sole fond memento of her old life and the herald of a new one.

“Hey, Slee... Threepio,” Kyra said, moving toward him.

“Yes, Mistress Kyra?”

Without another word she wrapped her arms around his metal shoulders and hugged him tight. “Oh, my,” the droid sounded, and Jao watched her face go soft and sentimental, for a moment as innocent as a child’s. Then she released C-3PO, and when she turned to Jao her face gained severity and years.

“I’m ready,” Kyra told him, and in those two words Jao understood all her meanings.

“Good,” he said. “Let’s get prepped to fly.”

## Chapter Eighteen

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One thing both Morrigan and Gunner could agree on, as spy and soldier respectively, was that you didn't charge into a situation without observing and evaluating it as fully as possible. Therefore, though they were both impatient, they took time to scope out Qorlis' facility on Ord Vaxal.

Resting just past the cusp of Hutt space, the planet had once served as an Imperial prison world, probably because its continents were covered in swamps and jungles populated by nasty wildlife that made escape attempts suicidal. Those days were long gone, and the ruins of the prison had become a shadowport. A settlement had grown up around the hilltop prison, and apparently some minor fortifications were enough to keep local beasts out of the city streets. Gunner brought them in for landing slowly, giving time to memorize the layout of the city from the air. She wheeled their ship in a broad circle and made sure to pass near Qorlis' facility, which Morrigan's data placed in an industrial zone downslope from the shadowport, near a stretch of city wall.

"Did you see that?" Morrigan said once they'd finished their pass-over and began setting down. "It looked like a bulk freighter was parked at Qorlis' place. A Corellian model."

"A YZ-2000," Gunner supplied. Of course she'd know her ships. "That matches with what we found in his data-cards. It's got to be his. He probably flew it straight from Orannessen. That means we've got him."

"It means we have his location." Morrigan restrained her enthusiasm. "We still need to scout his facility before entering."

After they set down on the landing pad and started cooldown, Gunner unstrapped from her pilot's chair and asked, "What do you think? This place doesn't smell Sith to me."

"No," Morrigan admitted, "But you can never be too sure. We should use the probe to give his site a better look."

"I was thinking the same thing."

Gunner and her mother went into the main hold, where in addition to various weapons and equipment, they had a single black observation droid, the size and shape of a blitzball, with visual and infra-red camera apertures protruding from one side. After connecting the droid to the ship's computer and inputting the topographic data from the city, they marked the location of Qorlis' facility for the droid and sent it off to spy.

It was still daylight and an observation droid would be noticed, especially by someone as paranoid as Qorlis must be. Morrigan's hope was that he'd run to this place to load essential equipment into his ship, then lift off and run to Maladi herself. If so he'd be in a rush, which meant he'd be sloppy and might miss the droid.

She and Gunner stayed in their ship's hold, watching holo-images the droid relayed back. The machine swept swiftly through the city streets, bobbed over a few rooftops, and easily climber over the high metal fence that roped off Qorlis' facility. Once inside it dropped altitude and began scouting the perimeter. Morrigan marked a large warehouse space as well as an independent power generator and what looked like some small assembly plant. No communications array, she noticed. That meant Qorlis made all his secret long-range calls from his ship.

The droid swung around to the back of the facility to focus on Qorlis' cargo vessel. The broad aft doors were open, and the droid edged closer to get a look inside its hollow belly. It barely got a peek before it abruptly retreated, swinging all the way around the warehouse's corner before carefully peering back toward the ship. A couple of heavy cargo crates

were being carried from the warehouse into the ship by repulsor-levitated droids that cradled each container in thick magnetized arms.

"HV-10s," Gunner muttered. Apparently she knew droids too. "Pretty common civilian model."

"There's no telling when he'll take off," Morrigan said. "You should stay with the ship. If he runs you can give chase. You can shoot him down if you have to."

"I'm not letting you go in there alone."

"I'm touched." Morrigan masked honesty with a sarcastic smile.

"I mean it. Until we know what's inside that plant we can't just send in one agent, especially if we're trying to take Qorlis alive. I think--"

Their attention was suddenly drawn to the holo-image. It blurred dizzily as the droid spun on its axis, then flashed with static. The image resolved a moment later: a tilted ground-level view, angled upward just enough to see a bare legs laced with elaborate tattoos. Morrigan's heart said *Sith* and a second later she got confirmation: the figure bent at the waist, low enough for them to see a cool face marked in the same harsh chiaroscuro, framed by two droop of two lekku head-tails.

Darth Talon, Krayt's pretty, ferocious attack animal. Of course she'd have survived.

The Twi'lek looked into the camera eye for a moment, then straightened. A blaster pistol appeared in her hand. The muzzle flicked to the camera and there was a flash, and then nothing but static.

Gunner was already on her feet and pulling a heavy blaster rifle from the weapons locker. "Sith. We've got to get over there fast."

Morrigan agreed. A second later she was arming herself and suiting up, but those last few seconds of relayed holo had disconcerted her in ways besides the obvious. In the time Morrigan had known her, Krayt's pet Twi'lek had always gone around barely-clothed, showing all the tattoos that covered her sinuous body head-to-foot. Talon's legs had been bare as usual here but Morrigan had spotted an armored plasteel vest encasing her torso, which seemed curious.



More notably, Talon had used a blaster to destroy the droid instead of a trusty lightsaber. Morrigan had ideas what that might mean but she didn't want to jump to conclusions, so she forced those thoughts to the back of her mind and joined Gunner in hurrying out of the ship.

Talon stared at the wreckage of the surveillance droid with held breath. The sound of two laser blasts had yet to bring Qorlis' security forces down on her, but he'd be sure to notice the termination of his droid. Yet as she stared at the smoking machinery she wondered if it *was* his droid; she recognized the model as one used exclusively by Imperial intelligence, and everything else she'd seen of Qorlis' has been available on the civilian market.

She finally tore her attention from the droid and sidled against the warehouse wall. Stuffing the blaster pistol into the holster at her belt- such an awkward motion- she took out her comlink and whispered, "Apprentice, did you hear that blast?"

"I think so," Eli's voice was faint and tinny. "What happened. Were you-"

"I shot a security droid," Talon said. "Do you see any response?"

She'd had Eli clamber up a utility ladder to the roof of the warehouse to try and get a better looked through glass panels in the ceiling. He said, "There's no changes. The loader droids are still moving cargo. They're almost done."

"Where's Qorlis?"

"I don't know. He might be on the ship. There's a few organics here too. A couple humans, a Rodian, and Weequay, two Niktos..."

"Armed?"

"I can't tell. They're not armored. Qorlis might have civilian staff."

The man apparently ran a mix of legal and extra-legal enterprises; likely these workers knew nothing about his side work for Maladi. In another situation she'd have joined Eli on the roof, and then they'd have dropped together through the windows, into the warehouse, and with sabers blazing

they'd have easily slaughtered the workers, keeping perhaps one alive for interrogation.

They couldn't do that now. Hours before setting down the Force had abandoned her as well. She understood none of it, only that she'd been robbed of a sense as valuable as sight. Her master had raised her from birth to feel and use the dark side of the Force intuitively. It had given her power, passion, and purpose, and even after Lord Krayt's death, when she'd started to silently question the direction of the One Sith, she'd never once doubted the dark side's power.

Now she had none of it. She was as powerless as a vermin, disconnected from the flow that directed the universe. Normally when she entered a dangerous situation she moved freely, eagerly, knowing the Force would preserve her against her enemies. Now she was tense; her breath was shallow, her chest tight. The plasteel vest seemed to weigh ten kilos. She'd never needed that kind of protection before. Her master had taught her to go into battle without fear, without armor or even clothes, because with the Force as her tool she needed only naked flesh and the dark energy that flowed through it.

She'd never felt more vulnerable than now.

Talon gathered her thoughts and told Eli, "Come down the ladder. Join me on the west side of the factory."

"Yes, Master," Eli said, then killed the connection.

*Master*, she thought bitterly. She was master of nothing now, not even herself.

As she waited she edged toward the corner of the building and looked at the landing pad. A few droids were floating back into the warehouse after depositing cargo in the ship. Talon didn't know what was in those crates, but her gut- not the Force, but supposition- told her that Qorlis was loading up his most valuable equipment to be taken elsewhere, possibly to Darth Maladi.

Talon had no idea why Krayt's scientist would inflict this agony on her own people. She only knew that Maladi was a genius, and if this disease was going to be reversed, she had to be captured and forced to provide an antidote.

She watched as something else emerged from the belly of the ship: a single human, middle-aged and slightly thickset,

with a trim brown beard and receding hair. A normal, ordinary man, but she recognized his face from the file Nihl had sent her. That was Qorlis, her prey.

Normally the Force could have told her exactly what to do. Now she had to decide and only seconds to do it before Qorlis stepped inside her warehouse, where he'd be harder to extract.

Talon did the simplest thing. She made sure her blaster was set to *stun* and stepped around the corner of the building to get a clear shot at Qorlis. The human saw her in the corner of his eyes and froze. She squeezed the trigger and dropped him with a flash of blue light.

If she had the Force she'd have levitated his heavy body, thrown him into his ship, then commandeered the vessel and its cargo. She had to do something else with him and fast; she heard faint commotion from inside the warehouse, speech in mixed Basic and Huttese. They'd heard the shot and were coming to investigate.

Talon hurried over to the prone Qorlis. She didn't have the Force anymore but her body was the honed machine it had always been. She squatted low, wrapped both arms around Qorlis' soft waist, and prepared to throw him over her shoulder for a fireman's carry.

That was when she heard the clack of metal on metal, looked back toward the ship, and saw two IX-6 battle droids coming down the ramp.

Instinct took over. Talon let Qorlis' body roll off her shoulder, grabbed the lightsaber belted to her waist, and flicked it on. She'd fought this model droid before; Krayt had kept them for his Sith to train with. She knew their speed and their rate of fire, their weak points she'd have to exploit.

Yet when they unleashed a barrage of laserfire from the blasters mounted at their wrists, Talon could barely hold them back. Her eyes were still keen, her reflexes sharp, but the blasts were simply coming too fast. Without the Force she couldn't anticipate where the next would come. She found herself backing away, into the hangar doorway, and the droids kept advancing.

Finally, one bolt got past her defenses and scorched across her bare right bicep. She grunted in pain and tried to catch

the next shot but it pounded into her plasteel chest armor. Another shot came after it, and another, stealing her breath and her balance and finally sending her skidding back across the floor of the warehouse.

That was when Eli appeared. He rushed in from the left, interposing himself between her and the droids. He had a blaster in one hand and a lightsaber in the other, and the droids reacted to his aimless spray of laserfire by edging for cover. Eli took advantage of those spare seconds to spin around and grab Talon's hand. He ran, pulling her across the warehouse floor as he did so, but Talon found the strength to kick herself upright. She joined Eli in finding cover behind a heavy storage crate, even as the droids pressed through the door and continued to attack.

"What do we do now?" Eli panted. His eyes were wide in fright and desperation.

Before Talon could say anything she spotted something from the corner of her eye, deeper within the warehouse. She looked back and spotted not more droids, thankfully, but some of the organic staff Eli had mentioned. Most were cowering just like the Sith were, confused and frightened, but she spotted one Nikto edging forward with a blaster rifle cradled in both hands. The droids weren't spitting fire in his direction, which meant they'd been programmed to treat Qorlis' staff as automatic friendlies.

If Talon had the Force she could vault the crate and kill both droids in seconds; instead she had to improvise and pray.

She clapped Eli on the shoulder and said, "You handle the droids."

Then she threw herself into a low shoulder roll out from behind the crates, beneath the droid's field of fire. She reignited her lightsaber as she ran for the Nikto, body held low. The sight of her charging froze the Nikto for a critical second, allowing Talon to slide across the floor, slip in behind him, and wrap her left arm around his neck for a choke hold. With her right hand she tilted her lightsaber in front of his eyes.

"Drop the weapon!" she barked, and prayed the vermin cowering in the rear of the room wouldn't be brave enough to try a shot at her back. She'd be dead in an instant.

The Nikto dropped his blaster. The two battle droids stopped firing for a critical second as they tried to compute whether they should kill her hostage. Eli used that second to come around from behind his crates and attack the closest droid. He threw himself into the metal body, lightsaber-first, and even without the Force he was able to spear the thing through, through withdrew his blade with an upward swipe that burned the droid's head and core processors in half.

Unfortunately, that gave time for the second droid to react. Instead of trying to blast through the metal body of its partner, the droid took two long side-steps and lashed out with a heavy arm. Eli tried to use his lightsaber to defend, but the droid fast faster, and its metal fist cracked against the human's cheek. He staggered back and barely kept from falling; the droid raised its other arm and pumped a volley of laserblasts that took Eli in his armored chest and knocked him to the ground.

By then Talon had extricated herself from her prisoner, neatly slashing through his throat with her lightsaber before charging across the room for the last droid. It turned from Eli and fired two shots dead at her, which she was able to deflect. Before it got off a third she jumped as high as she could, using not the Force but her own muscle and adrenaline to leap over the droid's volley, and as it tried to adjust its firing arc she came down, boots-first, lightsaber right behind them. Her blade speared scarlet through its head, and as the machine clattered to the ground she wrenched her blade through its torso, just to make sure it was dead.

When Talon staggered off the ruined droid she looked to Eli, breathing loudly, still prone on the floor but trying to get up. Then she looked to the warehouse staff still cowering the back of the room, cowed by her combat display, meager as it had been.

Then she heard a noise from outside, the roar of repulsors coming to life. Panting from the exertion, wincing from the pain still in her chest, Talon looked out the warehouse doors to see Qorlis' body was gone. Then she saw the freighter's broad loading ramp drawing upward and sprinted toward it. Standing just inside the closing door was a woman, a human woman with a shock of blond hair and a face that was

familiar, though the Sith couldn't begin to imagine from where.

The woman smirked, like she knew Talon and worse, exactly what had happened to her.

The scarlet-and-black Twi'lek took two staggering steps toward the mouth of the freighter; then she began to run. Morrigan, standing on the edge of the rising loading ramp, was ready. She raised a blaster pistol in either hand and unleashed two sprays of laserfire at the charging Sith. Talon managed to block the first few shots, but one slipped past her defenses and caught her in the armored chest. Talon stopped, staggered; she ducked to the side, chased by Morrigan's continued attacks.

Then the whole ship shuddered beneath Morrigan and began to rise. The ramp slanted steeply and Morrigan let herself slide down into the freighter's cavernous belly. The ship rose higher and she heard a muffled roar as its thrust engines engaged and pushed them higher into Ord Vaxal's atmosphere.

Morrigan felt a flush of elation. On any other day Darth Talon would have deflected and evaded her shots with agility that would have made any Force-blind dancer envious. Yet here the Twi'lek had plainly struggled, and her fight with the battle droid in the hangar had lacked all of the deadly grace Morrigan had seen from her before.

There was only one explanation. Darth Talon- perhaps the Sith as a whole- had gone as deaf to the Force as the Jedi and Imperial Knights.

She couldn't even begin to grasp the ramifications of that. What Morrigan could do was bask in earned satisfaction: they'd stolen not only Qorlis but his ship and cargo too, and now they'd left their enemies helpless in the dust.

Morrigan was unfamiliar with this kind of vessel, but within minutes she found her way to the cockpit. Gunner was in the pilot's seat, and through the viewport she could see the green-blue spread of Ord Vaxal below and stars faintly twinkling above.

"Any sign of pursuit?" Morrigan asked as she fell into the co-pilot's chair.

"Not that I can see." Gunner gripped the two-handed throttle hard. "This thing flies like a half-dead bantha."

"It's a cargo hauler, daughter, not a TIE fighter."

"What about our ship? We can't just leave it there."

"We took all of our most important equipment out before leaving."

"What about the computers?"

"They're programmed to self-destruct the first time anyone without proper clearance tries to access."

"So we leave it."

"That's right. In this line of work you have to be ready to cut your losses. You can send an updated message to the empress and tell her to send agents to pick it up, if you want."

"Okay," Gunner said.

She was clearly reluctant but obeyed anyway. She pulled the yoke back and pushed the freighter out of Ord Vaxal's atmosphere. The black enveloped them and the stars became clearer as they pulled further from the planet.

"Where did you put Qorlis?" Morrigan asked.

"I left him in the main hold. Trussed him up first." As she looked over the unfamiliar nav computer she asked, "Those Sith back there... Do you think it happened to them too?"

"That's what it looked like to me."

"So they've lost the Force too. What does that mean? *Did* this thing come from Maladi, or someplace else?"

"I don't know, but if the Sith were trying this hard to get Qorlis, I'm glad we got him first."

Gunner couldn't argue with that one. As they slipped out of Ord Vaxal's orbital range she asked, "What do we do now?"

"Just get us past the edge of the star system. Then we'll cut engines and take a nice break while we wait for Qorlis to wake up."

"And then?"

"Then we get some answers," Morrigan said. Nabbing Qorlis felt good, but she had a feeling they'd just completed the easy part of their mission, with the hard part yet to come.

When the roar of the departing starship became distant and dwindling, Eli finally found the strength to sit up. He planted

his palms on the hard ferrocete floor and pushed himself upright, fighting down the stabbing pain in his chest. He looked at his plasteel breastplate and saw it marked with dents, still faintly smoking. He knew if he peeled off his shirt he'd see welts and bruises left by the bolts' kinetic impact, and he prayed he'd not fractured anything in his sternum or ribcage.

They'd survived, but that was hardly reassurance. It was a battle they should have won with ease: two Sith versus two mindless droids and a handful of vermin. He couldn't even imagine what they'd lost.

As he forced himself to stand upright, Darth Talon walked back inside the hangar. She looked over Eli coolly; he marked the scorches on her armor, at least one of them minutes-old and smoking. If she'd gone into battle as she usually had, baring all her flesh as if tempting the enemy to wound her, Talon would be dead already.

"Qorlis," Eli wheezed. "Was he in the ship?"

"Yes," said Talon. "But he was not alone."

"Not more droids?"

She shook her head. "I believe... someone else was after Qorlis also."

"Who?"

Talon seemed to think; then she ignored his question and began walking back into the warehouse. She called out, "Show yourselves! Now!"

She was still counting on Qorlis' remaining people being cowed by the sight of her. Realizing he had to do his part, Eli followed, lightsaber ignited in his right hand. Beings were stepping into view, all of them holding hands up in surrender. He didn't need the Force to see how terrified these people were.

"Get in a line!" Talon barked. "All of you!" For emphasis she tapped on her lightsaber.

Most of them did just that. Eli stood behind Talon and watched as a Nikto, a Weequay, a Rodian, and two human men- one gray-haired and balding, the other about Eli's age- stood shoulder-to-shoulder. One human remained in the back of the chamber, frozen. Eli saw that one had a blaster holstered to his hip; the rest were unarmed.



“Come *here!*” Eli shouted. “We didn’t come to fight you!”

The man twitched; his hand edged closer to the blaster but he didn’t move his feet. With a frustrated snort, Talon hefted the blaster in her left hand and fired a single shot. The man dropped face-down on the floor, smoke from his chest seeping out from beneath his cooling corpse.

The other prisoners cowered. Talon barked for them to get on their knees and they did it, hands still behind their heads. Talon holstered her blaster and waved her lightsaber in front of their faces. As intimidating as ever she said, “You were loading Qorlis’ ship. What material were you putting in?”

At first none of the prisoners reacted. They all seemed too scared to speak. Talon waited thirty seconds, then flicked her lightsaber and decapitated the Rodian.

As the green head rolled in front of his knees the older human bleated, “Stang it, we don’t know! W-We manufacture droid parts here!”

“Battle droids?” Eli asked.

“No! Just parts! Servos! I’m a m-m-mechanic!”

“What was in those crates?” Talon asked again.

“I d-don’t know! Those were the sealed. We don’t even have the codes to open them! They were sitting in the b-b-back of the warehouse for m-m-months and Qorlis, he just landed five hours ago, told us he needed them all loaded right away.”

“Where is he taking them?”

“He d-d-didn’t say.”

Talon growled deep in her throat and looked over the other prisoners. No one volunteered any more information, so next she took off the Nikto’s head.

“I mean it!” the older man cried. “M-maybe he was taking them to Oranessen! He’s got an office there!”

“Not anymore,” Talon said simply. “Where *else* would he take them?”

The younger man was crying silently, tears running in mirrored streams down his face. The older one whimpered, “I don’t know. I really don’t. The boss... he had secrets. We didn’t care, he paid us good.”

“Did you see him use any hyperdrive-capable capsules, the size of a standard escape pod?” Eli asked, frustrated he

couldn't use the Force to pry the truth from them. "Have any of those passed through here?"

"What? No. I don't know what you're t-t-talking about, I really don't..."

Talon sighed. "The vermin know nothing," she said. "Apprentice, kill them and be done with it."

Eli's hand tightened on his lightsaber but his feet refused to move. Normally, in situations like this, he'd have acted immediately, taking life and feeling the dark side flow through him in triumph as he exhibited his superiority over weaker beings by ending their lives. Yet now, inexplicably, he hesitated.

"P-p-please no," whimpered the older man. "At l-least let my son go... Please..."

Eli's eyes drifted to the younger man in growing horror. He saw the similarities in their faces now, though one was grayed and trembling and the other's was drenched in soundless tears. The younger man must have followed his father's footsteps, learning the trade to become a servo manufacturer. It was a modest destiny, but one they'd shared together.

He looked between those faces, father and son, and found he couldn't move.

With a growl, Talon stepped forward and swept her lightsaber out in a long horizontal slash. She took all three remaining prisoners across the chest. The Nikto toppled to one side, smoke pouring from the gash across his sternum. The older man fall face-down, and Eli was relieved not to see his expression. The young man's body bent back, chest arcing up to show the smoking hole Talon had slashed through it. Dying lungs heaved for last scraps of breath and his tear-stained face opened wide to suck in air. Something rattled in his throat and he went still, wet eyes staring at the ceiling.

Talon shut off her lightsaber and hooked it to her belt. "You hesitated," she said, like a condemnation.

Eli stilled his trembling hand. "I'm sorry."

"Whatever's happened to us we are *still* Sith. Don't forget that."

"Yes," Eli rasped.

He prayed it was true. He felt sick inside, nauseous and weak where he should have felt a thrill of dark triumph. He needed that feeling of triumph back; otherwise he might collapse in on himself until becoming the terrified child he'd been, lonely and lost after his father's pointless death.

He looked up at Talon and didn't flinch from her cold gaze. "What do we do now?" he asked.

"We search this place in case Qorlis left something. Then we will contact Lord Nihl." The strength in Talon's voice faltered. She added, "Perhaps he will know what comes next."

When Nial Qorlis emerged from his stun bolt-induced nap he found himself inside the vestibule area of his freighter's airlock, slumped against the outer door that kept the ship sealed tight against the vacuum. His legs splayed out free in front of him but his hands were locked behind his back by stun cuffs which themselves were magnetically sealed to the door. When he blinked his eyes clear he made out two women standing in the open inner doorway, looking down at him with unforgiving stares.

Morrigan didn't much envy Qorlis at the moment, but for what he'd helped bring about, she figured primal terror was the least he deserved.

Qorlis jerked his hands behind his back, and when it became clear that he was trapped he looked up at Morrigan and Gunner and tried to march their glares. "Who are you people? You're not Sith."

"My name's Morrigan Corde. Is that familiar?"

Qorlis' right eye twitched. "Possibly."

Morrigan crouched in front of him, just out of reach if he tried to snap a leg at her. "You should be grateful we got to you before the Sith did."

"You'll excuse me if I don't thank you."

"That's your prerogative," she shrugged. "But you *will* answer our questions."

"Kark yourself," Qorlis muttered.

"If you don't want to talk, fine," Gunner crossed her arms over her chest. "We'll just crack open that airlock door right now and watch you turn blue."

Qorlis repeated his last statement.

Morrigan shook her head. "You know, I'd heard you had some Force sensitivity. Some training. It's why you were considered valuable to the Sith, and Darth Maladi especially. I'm surprised you haven't tried to, say, blur our minds. Or give my throat a little squeeze. That would be very Sith."

"Sorry to disappoint."

Morrigan removed one of the finger-sized blades she kept in her jacket's left sleeve. Pinching the dull end between two fingers, she dangled the tip over Qorlis' thigh. With her other hand she caught his ankle in a vice-grip, preventing him from shifting the leg.

"What the hell is this?" he grunted.

"If you still have the Force, it should be no problem knocking this little thing from the air."

"Wait—" Qorlis started, but Morrigan let go. The little dagger dropped straight down. Its tip tore through trouser-fabric and skin beneath, lodging in muscle, but without any force behind it the blade didn't go deep enough to cut major blood vessels. Some blood spread out from the wound, staining his clothes. Qorlis writhed and grunted, but nothing more.

Morrigan stood up, wiped the blood off the dagger, and stuck it back inside her sleeve. "Jedi and Imperial Knights all over the galaxy are losing contact with the Force," she said. "What's really surprising is that the Sith are losing it too. What's Maladi's game? I know you're working for her. Nobody else could pull this off."

"She'll kill me if I talk to you." Qorlis snarled through his pain.

"We'll kill you if you don't talk," Morrigan said.

"Not like her. She'd use me. One of her karking experiments..."

"What kind of experiments has she been doing? No, better question: *Where* has she been doing them? Where can I find Maladi now?"

"I don't know."

Morrigan lifted the dagger again.

"I mean it! I really don't know!"

"You must have some idea," Gunner said. "You've been working for her, right? Setting up... whatever is going on now."

"Yes," he admitted through clenched teeth.

"Did you hire those Mandalorians to kidnap Jedi, or did she do that directly?" asked Morrigan. "I know she has connections with Yaga Auchs."

"I set it up."

"Just kidnappings on Belgaroth and Nubia, or the other ones?"

"All of them. Maladi went with Auchs' people on the last two, so she could wipe the Jedi's memories." He licked dry lips. "The other ones we captured... they didn't survive."

"Okay, now we're getting somewhere. What else did you do for Maladi? How did those Sith get on your tail?"

"I don't know. Not exactly."

"Has Maladi been working with Darth Nihl?"

"No. She's been on her own since Krayt died. She doesn't even know where the other Sith are hiding now. Honest."

"Then how come the Sith are losing the Force?" Gunner asked.

"I set up... a trap. Maladi knew about some emergency beacons the One Sith set up to communicate with in case things went really bad. I sent her message to one beacon, told the Sith to set up a rendezvous. I sent a pod, this hyperspace-capable passenger pod, to that location." He swallowed. "I stuck one of Maladi's... test subjects in there. Still alive."

"A plague vector," Morrigan said.

"Exactly. Guess it worked."

"If you're doing all these things for Maladi- getting test subjects, shipping them out- you *must* have an idea where she is. Unless there's *another* middleman."

Qorlis licked his lips again. "*Man* might not be the best word there."

"Then what are we dealing with?" asked Gunner.

He paused a moment, probably thinking about all the things Maladi might do to him when she found out she'd been betrayed, but then he said, "Everything I do for Maladi- everything I give her or she gives me- goes through Asation.

I transfer cargo to the Gree, and where it goes after that, I don't know."

Morrigan exhaled and sunk to a crouch. She'd never expected the trail to lead to the Gree Enclave, of all places. The Gree were an ancient race, arguably the oldest civilization still extant. Tens of thousands of years ago their empire had spanned the galaxy, with worlds supposedly connected by hypergates that transferred matter instantly across the stars. Gree space had since shrunk to half a sector's space in the Outer Rim, not that far from the heart of old Imperial territory. The Gree were fiercely isolationist, with a reputation for shooting down smugglers and adventurers who tried to get beyond Asation, the one world they'd designated as their exchange zone with the larger galaxy.

The Old Republic had mostly left them alone; so had Palpatine's Empire, the New Republic, the Galactic Alliance, the Empire under Krayt, even the Yuuzhan Vong during their rampage. Morrigan had no idea what relations the Gree had with the current Federation government. To the overwhelming majority of the galaxy, the Gree were some antique curiosity, irrelevant to all but a handful of xenoarchaeologists and dare-seekers whose curiosity inevitably smashed against the Gree's wall of isolationism.

Yet somehow, Maladi had ensconced herself in the Gree Enclave. It was the perfect place to hide, and to avoid pursuit. Which meant that to reach Maladi, Morrigan would have to get creative.

"What happens when you and Maladi have your little hand-offs?" she asked Qorlis. "Give me the details."

Qorlis sighed, then relented. "I go to Asation at the scheduled time. I sit in orbit until this Gree ship approaches and broadcasts Maladi's identification code."

"The same ship or different?" asked Gunner.

"Best I can tell the same one. I hand the cargo off to them, or vice-versa--"

"How?" Morrigan said.

"We couple cargo holds. I open the doors, they come in, take the stuff."

"You ever talk to them?"

"I used to try. They just make weird noises and stare at you with these big black eyes, and their tentacles-" He stopped himself. "Either of you ever seen a Gree?"

Morrigan and Gunner shook their heads.

"Okay, well forget it. That's how it happens. I give or take, depending on how it's all set up."

"Meaning you set it up with Maladi beforehand?"

"Yes."

"You mean you actually talk to her, via holo?"

"Right. And don't bother asking if I've traced the signal. Of course I have. It's bounced through some relay over Asation. She could be down on the surface, or any other Gree planet. I don't know."

Morrigan was formulating a plan. She glanced back at Gunner to see the same idea entering her head, and for once was disheartened by her daughter's quick thinking. Getting into Gree space and finding Maladi would be dangerous work; getting out would be even harder.

Yet Morrigan didn't balk from that task. It wasn't just that she relished being out in the field after her captivity, though that was part of it. She felt she had something to settle with Maladi, but that wasn't the heart of it either. What was happening now could shift the fate of galaxy in unpredictable ways; more importantly, it was a danger to her son and Kol's legacy. It had to be stopped.

A little sourly, Morrigan longed for the days when she could ignore her nagging conscience.

"You knew the Sith were after you," she told Qorlis, "But you still stopped on Ord Vaxal to stuff those crates into your cargo hold. We thought about opening one of them up, but we didn't want to risk triggering any boobytraps or other nasty surprises. What's inside?"

Something rattled in his throat. "What do you *think*?"

"Something Darth Maladi would want, I hope."

"The Mandalorians busted some biomechanical supplies from a research center on Arkania for her. Don't ask what she needs them for. Even if she told me- which she *didn't*- I'd never understand."

Morrigan believed him; the man seemed to have recognized that his only hope of survival came through

giving up his old boss and begging for mercy. She said, "I don't suppose Maladi knows you've been chased off your old bases by Darth Talon."

"Haven't had the time to call her," he said dryly.

"Well, you will. And you'll set up a time to rendezvous with her Gree friends at Asation to transfer the cargo."

"Let me guess. You want to sneak a ride aboard some of those crates and smuggle yourselves into Maladi's hide-away."

"That's the idea. Naturally, if there's any sign of betrayal on your part, I'll kill you. And I have a dozen ways to do it. Fast or slow. Quiet or loud. Painless or agonizing."

"I figured as much." Qorlis rattled his wrists in their binds. "So do we have a deal? Are you letting me out now?"

"Not yet," Morrigan said, and shot him. The dart-thrower under her right sleeve released a tiny *whiff* as the fingernail-sized projectile burst out. Its barb caught Qorlis in the neck; he got out a tiny gurgling sound before his head hung low and his body went limp.

Behind Morrigan, her daughter said, "Couldn't you have just stunned him with a blaster?"

Morrigan bent over his body and plucked the dart from his skin. Admiring it between finger and thumb she said, "It's a new concoction. I wanted to make sure it put him to sleep right away."

"How long will he be out for?"

"In theory, three hours. We'll see how it works in practice." Morrigan pocketed the dart. "Let's let Qorlis have his beauty sleep."

Gunner nodded and both women made their way from the airlock to the main hold. The heavy crates were pushed against the walls and secured with a magnetized grip, leaving the center of the space yawning and open. As they walked across the deck Gunner said, "We should open up these crates now and figure out where we can hide ourselves."

Morrigan shook her head. "You're not coming with me."

The younger woman planted her hands on her hips. "Yes, mother, I am. Because trying to sneak by yourself into a hidden Sith lab in karking Gree space is *insane*."



“Another person won’t make a big difference. Your job here is to monitor me and report my actions to the empress. We both know that. Besides, I need someone to stay with Qorlis after the handover to make sure he doesn’t get on the comm to Maladi right away.”

“There’s other ways to keep Qorlis quiet.”

Morrigan didn’t need reminding; she’d just bragged about all the ways she could kill. “You’re right. It’s going to be risky. Too risky. That’s why you should leave it to veteran field agents instead of a snubfighter pilot on holiday.”

Gunner snorted and shook her head. “Mother, you are unbelievable.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“You’ve taught me better than you think.”

Morrigan wondered where this was going. “Have I?”

Gunner crossed her arms. “Where is my brother?”

For once, Morrigan was speechless. She’d never expected the conversation to go in this direction.

“I noticed you were trying to send me off to bed last night, Mother. Once I got tired I took a shower and went to my room like a good little girl. I also put an audio relay in the cockpit. It was under the co-pilot’s chair. You should have checked.”

Morrigan couldn’t help feeling chagrined. “I should have. You’re right. You’ve learned well.”

“I can’t believe my brother’s alive.”

“Half-brother.”

“Half is bad enough. Mother, the whole galaxy thinks Cade Skywalker is dead. Or is this some secret the empress has been holding tight?”

“No. Only me. Cade flew Krayt’s body into Coruscant’s sun, just like everybody thinks. Then his friends on the *Mynock* scooped him up. Don’t ask me what he’s been doing since. Last night was the first time we’d talked since the empress put me under house arrest.”

Gunner sighed. “I suppose now you’ll ask me to keep his secret.”

“You can do with it what you want. But yes, I’d like that. So would Cade, not that I expect his feelings to matter much.”

She watched Gunner stew those thoughts over, watched her scowl relax. The young woman put on a strong front, trying to appear the hard, disciplined soldier she wished to be, but there were cracks in every mask, and no one ever totally became the person they wanted to be. Morrigan knew that very well.

"Stang it," Gunner breathed. "I knew this mission was going to be a mess."

"Then at least your expectations were met," Morrigan smiled faintly. "And I think I owe you an apology."

Gunner blinked in surprise. "What kind of apology?"

"You're a better agent than I gave you credit for. But you're a pilot at heart. A soldier like your father. If you want to keep on that path, you should charge full ahead. No doubts. No regrets."

Her mother's honesty made Gunner look away, embarrassed. "Thank you."

It was hard, but Morrigan continued. "I was hardly the best mother. I apologize for that too. I thought I could use your father as a stepping-stone to something better. I used him, and you. It didn't get me where I wanted and I shouldn't have used you in the first place."

Gunner stared stubbornly at the deck. Eventually she muttered, "I'm glad you can admit it."

"So am I," Morrigan said. It was very true; she felt as though something had lifted off her shoulders, maybe the weight she'd put on when first becoming Nyna Calixte. All those years ago, when she'd been young and ambitious and vain, she'd never bothered to count the cost of deception: to others, to herself.

Eventually Gunner drew herself up and looked back to her mother. "Okay. Enough family time. We have a mission to plan."

"Agreed."

Gunner turned toward the nearest of Qorlis' crates. "What do you think we'll need to open one of these?"

Morrigan shot her in the back of the neck. There was only the faint *whiff* of the dart, and Gunner's right hand went to the place where the barb had stuck. Fingers brushed metal,

and then she collapsed. Morrigan lunged forward, caught her as she fell, and lowered her body slowly.

“I’m sorry, Gunn.” Morrigan brushed blonde hair away to look at her daughter’s face. When it relaxed from its habitual scowl, it could be quite pretty.

She kissed Gunner once on the cheek, then hooked arms beneath her shoulders and began dragging her limp form across the deck. The escape pods were on the opposite side of the hull from the airlock; once Gunner was safely away, Morrigan would get to work with Qorlis. There was still a lot to be done before they were ready to meet with the Gree, and things would only get more dangerous from here on. Morrigan had every intention of seeing her children survive this; after all she’d done as both Corde and Calixte, it was the smallest restitution.

## Chapter Nineteen

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What had been done could be undone. Azlyn Rae had to believe that, though the story of her life had been a long testament to the contrary. This was different, though, beyond the slaughter of the Jedi, her joining the Imperial Knights, or the horrible injuries at Had Abbadon. During all those trials, the Force had been with her. It was her only constant, and she'd never doubted it could be otherwise.

The hunt for those responsible for the disease was more urgent than ever, and when Anj Dahl reported that they were receiving a hail from Hondo Karr, Azlyn and Shado hurried to the cockpit, tense with anticipation.

"We've got a tip from one of our allies," said the projected image of the Mandalorian. His bare blond head appeared over above shoulders set in dark armor. "Thorum Rhal was spotted on Ord Mantell. His ship's docked at the Second Wheel, the biggest space station in orbit. Docking bay 34-F."

Intel couldn't get more specific than that. Azlyn's heart lifted.

"How long ago did they see him?" asked Anj.

"Less than two standard hours. They spotted his ship, they called me, and I called you."

"Can your people interdict him for us?"

Karr shook his head. "It's just one man, and Rhal's got his whole crew with him. Are you still at Paqualis III?"

"We've been sitting tight," Anj confirmed.

"Then you should kick off now and move to intercept. There's no telling how long Rhal will stay there."

"What about your people?" Shado asked.

Karr's face twisted, and the Mandalorian said, "We're still in the middle of that other job, and we're outbound for Mando space. You can get to Ord Mantell was faster than we can."

Azyl'n's heart fell; it would have been bad news as it was, but without the Force as they ally, there was no way she and Shado would be able to disarm a shipful of Mandalorians.

There was no way they were going to tell Hondo Karr that, but they'd explained the problem to Anj, and the Alliance pilot took point. "We'll make our way there now. Can you set us up with your contact on the Second Wheel and have him keep an eye on Rhal?"

"Sure. I'll attach his hailing frequency at the end of this transmission. Good barve by the name of Oren Vevec."

"A relation?"

"Brother-in-law. Wants justice for his *buir* same as Tes. We'll let you know when the other job's done, see if we can't help."

"Thanks, Hondo. We'll take it from here."

"Listen, if this gets you a trail to the Sith, we want to know. Our leader—"

"She's willing to work with us to bring down Auch's. I remember. We'll figure that out *after* we've got Rhal."

Karr nodded curtly. "Safe flying, Rogue Leader."

"You too, Rogue Six," Anj said seriously, then killed the connection. She glanced at the comm console and nodded. "We've got the contact info. We should hail Oren Vevec as soon as we lift off."

Neither knight moved from their seats. Shado said, "There's no way we can take Rhal right now. Not... not the way we are."

"Then we'll need some help." Anj had slipped from her usual upbeat, informal self into something else: cold, calculating, soldierly. "Ord Mantell isn't too far from Bilbringi. A stormtrooper assault team could get there before us."

"Ord Mantell isn't affiliated with the Federation," Shado pointed out. "It doesn't even *have* a government of its own. The surface is a Vongformed wasteland and the space stations in orbit all have their own separate chiefs."

"I'm not saying launch a star destroyer, just an assault team to help us at the Second Wheel." Anj looked to Azlyn. "This is the only way. I know you guys can't handle the Mandalorians by yourselves right now. We're going to need some help, and it's not coming from Hondo."

She was right, of course. Azlyn hated it; she hated how helpless and pathetic she felt, needing to beg last-minute help for a job she was incapable of doing. But if there going to trace this contagion to its source, if they were to regain the Force, they'd need help from any place they could get it.

"You and Shado can start prepping for takeoff," Azlyn said. "I'll call the empress."

When Ania woke up she found herself laying on a soft but stale-smelling bunk. Then she noticed her wrists were bound with some type of malleable but firm cable, and so were her ankles. She'd been stunned before and she was familiar with the grogginess she felt now, the addled mind. She flexed her limbs, snapped her feet over the edge of the bed, and levered her torso up so she could properly sit on the bed. One meter ahead of her: a door of cold, vertical metal bars spaced too close together to fit more than an arm through.

Motion brought back memory: running down soft-floored hallways on Esseles, grabbing the blaster from her guest room after cursing herself for not carrying it, jumping over the bed to use it as cover when the door blew, and two armored figures marched in. Against their Mandalorian armor her blaster wasn't worth a damn.

Mandalorians were mercenaries, bounty-hunters. Of course their ship would have cells for prisoners. How long they'd been in transit, she had no idea. Where they were going, how they'd found her on Esseles, why they wanted her in the first place: she had no idea about those either. She'd made enemies in her life. Rav was just the most recent, but she struggled to think of anyone who'd hire Mandalorians to chase her across the stars.

This cell must have had a camera hidden somewhere, because a few minutes after she woke up she heard a door clanking open. The man who walked in was encased to his neck in shiny black armor, marked in a few places by strips

of gold. His bare face was square and serious, framed by messy blond hair. He held a tray in two hands and slid it beneath a small gap between the barred door and the deck.

Looking down on the food, simple as it was, reminded Ania how hungry she was, but she didn't reach for it. Instead he looked at the Mandalorian and asked, "Where are you taking me?"

"You'll find out soon enough," the man said. He was staring closely at her face, as though looking for something.

As long as he was here she might as well ask questions. "Who hired you to kidnap me?"

"Nobody hired us."

"Oh, so you just randomly steal women when you feel like it?"

"No. We were after you."

Ania had a feeling this whole conversation would be maddening, but she pressed on. "How did you find me?"

"We've been looking for you for a while, ever since you made a big splash on the news-nets for helping the empress a year back. Seems like you did a pretty good job of laying low after that."

"I tried," she said dryly.

"We picked up reports of your crew. Mon Gazza. Socorro. Some allies finally tracked you down to the Thrumble Foundation on Esseles. Your coming outside that night was just good coincidence. Otherwise we'd have had to go deep inside the facility to get you out."

"What about my friends? If you hurt them, I—"

"Your friends are fine, *dal'ika*. Better than mine, in fact. That pretty human replica droid popped out Jind's shoulder, which was no mean feat."

Ania didn't say she was sorry. She wasn't. "What now?"

"Now you have a little snack and hold tight," the blond man said. "Should be another, oh, ten hours. You might as well go back to napping."

"What happens when we get to our destination?"

The Mando looked at her thoughtfully. "I imagine a lot of that will be up to you."

Ania didn't understand that, didn't understand any of this. If her hands and feet weren't bound tight she'd have lunged

at him through the bars. “Damn it, you can at least give me *some* idea what’s going on.”

He shrugged armored shoulders. “You’ll find out soon enough. Have some food, get some rest. Enjoy our hospitality.”

She responded with a glower. The Mando was hardly intimidated. He turned and walked out of the room without a second glance.

Ania’s bound-together hands balled into fists, futile and angry. The worst part was that he was right. The only thing left for her now was to wait and see what fate these mercenaries- if that’s what they were today- would deliver her to.

Leaning awkwardly forward, she picked the tray off the deck and placed it in her lap. She’d do as the Mando said: have some food, take a nap. Get well-rested and ready. Whatever was waiting for her at their destination, she didn’t intend to take it lying down.

Kyra had no experience chasing kidnappers through deep space. Thankfully her comrades were a little more capable. Guri had patched the tracking beacon’s signature to *Free Agent’s* computer, but in order to avoid detection, the signal only sounded once every thirty standard minutes. A ship could spend days in hyperspace, where it was impossible to intercept, and they’d have to wait until the Mandalorians re-entered realspace to take them. With every signal from the beacon Sauk re-calculated potential destinations, and it soon became clear that the Mandalorian vessel was heading Rimward on the Hydian way. If they were heading to Mandalorian space, which seemed likely, it would take less than a standard day to get there.

Once they caught up with Ania’s kidnappers, there was no way of knowing what would happen. Sauk had suggested negotiating first. They did, after all, have crates full of raw bullion, and they might well be able to buy out the Mandalorians. Jao was skeptical; he wanted to try sneaking up on the enemy, stealing Ania out from under their noses if possible or disabling them one-by-one. Sauk had pointed out that their little rescue team only had three people, and only



one of those was a trained combatant. Out-fighting the Mandalorians didn't seem feasible, Force or no Force.

Kyra had no idea which option was better. She felt out of her depth in every way. She knew nothing about stealth tactics or blaster fighting, and she'd never even imagined she might have to face off against Mandalorian mercenaries. It would have been much easier to stay on Esseles with her old, new droid and let someone else take the risks.

Despite that, she had doubt that she belonged here. Over the past week Kyra had been shown more kindness and earnest consideration than she had in the past year. She'd let these people into her heart and trust more easily than she'd thought possible, and she felt closer to Ania than anyone. Caring about people besides yourself meant you had responsibilities toward them and sometimes that meant putting their problems ahead of your own. That meant she needed to be here, whatever the risk.

Besides, she did have one special tool. First she needed to learn how to use it.

As *Free Agent* crawled up the Hydian in pursuit of the Mandalorians, they were left with hours of empty waiting. Sauk kept a compulsive eye on the tracker's twice-an-hour reports, and the only time he left the cockpit was to eat and nap. That left room for Jao and Kyra to meet in *Free Agent's* hold and see what they could accomplish with the Force.

Jao had her sit down on the deck, cross-legged, back straight, hands resting palm-up on her crooked knees. It was a classic meditation pose, he said, used by both Jedi and Imperial Knights to clear the body and mind. He sat down in mirrored position a meter away, facing her with his lightsaber sitting inert between them.

On Jao's command she closed her eyes and tried to concentrate. The hold was never silent: the climate system pumped air steadily through the vents, and the hyperdrives rumbled faintly, but the sounds were low and constant. She tuned them out easily and tried to slow her breathing and empty her mind. It was hard. Just hours ago her heart had been racing with piled-on tensions. She could never just forget that Ania was in danger, nor that a dangerous confrontation lay ahead.

"I know it's difficult," Jao said, "But you really have to clear your thoughts."

"How can I do that?"

"Listen to the engines. Can you hear that? Quiet. Steady. Let your mind be like that. Let your thoughts slow down."

Kyra tried to do that. She listened to the engine drone and tried to focus on that to the exclusion of all else. She didn't know how long it took her to do that; she was losing a sense of time, which she imagined was the point.

Eventually Jao said, "That's good. Now without leaving the flow, try to sense what I'm feeling now."

That seemed like a paradox, but Kyra tried anyway. Keeping her thoughts steady, in tune with the soft engine-rumble, she tried to get a sense of the man in front of her. She *knew* he was in front of her, even though her eyes were closed and he was silent. It was that wordless and instant knowing, like how she usually knew how to fix a broken spaceship.

Because that knowledge came easily she tried to look deeper into Jao, even as she kept her thoughts in-pace with the droning engines. She sensed that his mind was in some way a mirror of her own, packed with anxieties he was keeping down with effort, though in his case it was a more practiced thing. She sensed that his need to rescue Ania ran deeper than her own, that the woman had become the determinant and focus of his life. Even more than for Kyra, Jao's life could be separately neatly into the times before and after he'd met Ania Solo.

"I didn't know," she whispered, eyes still closed.

"What do you mean?"

"How much she meant to you."

She felt him draw inward, as though embarrassed. "What else can you feel? Can you sense Sauk?"

Kyra didn't even realize that was possible; the Mon Cal had no force powers that she was aware. Nonetheless she tried. She tried to broaden her awareness, looking past Jao while still keeping herself centered on the faint, steady engine-noise. After an uncertain time she did find something, another locus of anxiety. It was faint and distant but she could tell it was Sauk and she tried to direct more awareness

to it. It was a struggle, but that second mind grew a little in clarity. She felt that Sauk was fighting off exhaustion, using stress as a stimulant to keep awake for the beacon's next report.

She was amazed she could accomplish that much, but she felt herself becoming unbalanced and drew her mind back to her centered self. She still knew Jao was there, and Sauk, but she no longer had to strain to feel their presences.

"I felt him," Kyra said.

"That's very good."

"I thought I could only feel other... Force-users."

"Everyone is part of the Force. Many people who can't use it still have unique signatures in it that are just as recognizable as a knight's."

"Ania?"

He didn't reply with words, and her eyes stayed closed, but she still sensed his affirmative.

"What else can we try?" she asked.

"You want to keep going."

"Yes," she said. She needed to do more than this if she was going to help rescue Ania.

Jao didn't need her words to know that. He admonished softly, "Don't press yourself too hard. Then you'll lose balance entirely and lose the Force. The connection only comes when you've found peace on the inside."

"Okay," she said, and tried to still her thoughts.

When he seemed satisfied, Jao said, "Can you sense my lightsaber?"

She knew Force-users could pick up objects with their minds; everybody knew that about them, if little else. She didn't understand how that worked, since they weren't alive, but she tried anyway. She knew exactly where this weapon was, could picture in her mind's eye as it lay just out of arm's reach. She let her awareness search in that one spot and certainty came to her. Though she'd never looked at Jao's lightsaber too closely she was suddenly aware of its smooth curve, the seams in its metal plating, the round nozzle of its emitter, the focusing mechanism inside and the white crystal at its heart.

"Very good," Jao said. "Now can you lift it?"

“How do I do that?”

“You’ve done it before. Take it in your hand. Just will it to happen, and it will.”

It was another piece of advice that seemed frustratingly vague, but she went along with it. Going back into her mind’s eye she pictured the lightsaber lifting off the metal deck soundlessly, drifting a half-meter toward her, and dropping softly into her right hand. She pictured it, she desired it. She willed it to happen.

And, just like that, a weight pressed onto her palm. Fingers wrapped around smooth cold metal. She struggled against the instinct to pop open her eyes and stare, just to be absolutely sure that lightsaber was really there.

“You have it. That’s good.” Jao said. “Not keep your eyes closed and stand up.”

“The lightsaber-”

“Keep it.”

She wasn’t going to argue. A little awkwardly, Kyra uncrossed her legs and used her left hand to help her rise. She heard Jao shift and rise also, and though her eyes were still stubbornly shut she felt him standing in front of her, evaluating her with the Force and open eyes.

“You can turn on the lightsaber,” he said.

Kyra rolled the cylinder with her fingertips until the button rested in her palm. She felt, without knowing how, that the emitter was aimed outward, but just to be sure she held the cylinder horizontally in front of her before squeezing it on. She heard the snap and hiss of ignition, and the hum of the white blade. She couldn’t see it, and it had no weight.

She heard Jao’s boots clack lightly on the deck as he walked a wide circle around her. He said, “Go ahead. Swing it around. Get used to it.”

“Can I open my eyes?”

“No. You have to feel it.”

The last thing she wanted was to feel that blade accidentally slice through her thigh or waist or left arm, but she trusted Jao would stop her before she injured herself. Cautiously, she twisted her wrist and listened to the lightsaber move. Then she tried slicing it through the air, and then she tried a few careful thrusts. The weapon was wholly

weightless, but somehow she could sense its motions. It was more than seeing with her mind's eye; it was knowing the knowing with a certainty that defied her traditional five senses.

"That's good," Jao said soothingly. He'd circled around to stand in front of her, a meter or two ahead. "Now I want you to come at me with the lightsaber. Try swinging and thrusting in my direction."

"You mean with my eyes closed?"

"That's right. Don't be afraid."

She wasn't afraid for herself. "I don't want to hurt you."

"You won't," he said. Not prideful, but assuring.

She was still afraid, but she tried to subsume her emotions into the steady drone of the engines, as he'd first advised. Once she felt herself calm enough, she took two steps forward and thrust at where she sensed Jao was. It was a slow, careful motion, giving him plenty of time to move away. She didn't hear his boots on the deck- he must have been walking lightly- but next his voice came from her right side.

"That's not bad," he said. "Keep sensing me. Keep coming at me. And don't be afraid to come at me harder."

She was amazed he could sound so calm, so confident. She tried to take that confidence into herself and moved forward again. She stabbed into empty air, faster this time. Without his making a sound she felt that Jao had moved to her right, and she stabbed there.

They continued the dance, over and over again. She felt Jao's motions even as he moved soundlessly. With each thrust or swipe he dodged, and she grew more confident in her attacks, though she never let her movements get out of control. Over and over again they repeated it, and each time the knowledge came to Kyra of where to strike next. It was all so *easy* once she got into the flow; she felt subsumed into something vastly greater than herself, someone that controlled her but which she could also effect. It was a paradox but that didn't bother her. It seemed that only through the paradox could she approach the truth.

It was exhilarating like nothing Kyra had ever experienced before, and she found herself suffused with a joy that wiped

away all her anxieties. In that moment she was happy to simply be: to move, to act, to sense and feel all according to the spectacular power she'd unlocked within herself.

And then, finally, the flow faltered. Jao said, "That's good, Kyra. That's enough."

She tilted the lightsaber down and opened her eyes. She came back into herself and found her skin prickled with sweat, her breathing hard, but the adrenaline in her body and the echoing song in her mind filled her with residual joy.

She looked to her left shoulder, where she'd known Jao would be, and saw him standing there with a small knowing smile on his face.

"Congratulations," he said. "You've just taken your first step into a much larger world."

She fumbled for words to say. They all failed to capture what she'd just experienced, and the feeling reverberating through her now. In the end she managed, "Thank you."

"My pleasure," Jao said, and she knew he meant it.

She shut off the lightsaber, almost reluctantly, and held it out. Jao took it, then stepped closer and squeezed her shoulder. "You should take a break for now. I feel a little headache coming on, but once I'm rested we should have time to practice again before we catch up with Ania."

*Ania.* With a flush of shame Kyra realized she'd forgotten about the woman, the reason they were like this now. With effort she grounded herself in the normal world and reminded herself how serious its stakes were.

"I'd like to train a little more," she said seriously. "I want to be ready."

"We'll do what we can." Jao squeezed her shoulder again, then let go. "Rest and process what just happened. And then we'll do it again. This is just the start, and you have a long way yet to go."

Cade had gone back to *Mynock* to retrieve the Thrumble Foundation's payment for services rendered. He couldn't deny they deserved it; Guri and her technicians had worked nothing short of a miracle getting C-3PO operable again, and they'd managed to restart AG-37 and work out residual side-effects from that Mandalorian ion charge. That didn't even

count how Guri had literally put herself in the line of fire trying to prevent Ania's kidnapping.

The techs were running final diagnostics on him now, and Guri had taken Cade aside to present him with the final bill. It was steep, but for once in his life Cade was confident he could afford it. That said, he fully intended to track down *Free Agent* and its crew once they left Esseles. Aside from returning AG-37 to his comrades, Cade intended to get at least a fifty percent reimbursement for what he was handing over to Guri now. What he'd do with the other droids was a trickier question; R2-D2 had been trailing C-3PO like a metal shadow ever since the protocol droid's resurrection, and though they seemed to bicker like the proverbial married couple, Cade doubted either of them would take well to being separated again. He'd grown used to having R2-D2 around, but he was considering letting him and C-3PO both go over to *Free Agent*, to Kyra and Ania.

Assuming they got her back. Despite barely knowing Ania Solo, Cade already felt he had a good handle on her. That they were distant cousins was surprising, yet now that it had settled in, it made a weird kind of sense. He'd known that his father and Roan Fel had been relatives, though they'd been no closer personally than Cade was to Marasiah. Ania apparently came from that same auspicious and ill-fated line, but whereas Cade had felt hounded by his legacy from a young age- hounded so hard he'd retreated for a long time into anger, bitterness, and death sticks- Ania had been mostly oblivious. Cade certainly understood the desire to live your own life without the weight of the dead pushing you down, but he also understood that, sometimes, the weight had to be shouldered. Maybe Ania would have to do some of that herself one day; he hoped she was strong enough.

As he finished counting out the agreed number of aurodium ingots, the comlink in Cade's pocket buzzed, announcing that a call for him was coming in through *Mynock's* main comm array. His chest tightened when he saw that it was coming in through the encrypted frequency known to only him and his mother.

Cade straight-up ran to the cockpit, where he dropped into the co-pilot's chair and turned on the comm console. A head-

and-shoulders holo-image of Morrigan Corde appeared before him, expression serious.

"Cade, I need you to listen very carefully," she said. "Along with this transmission I'm sending you tracking information for a beacon. I placed it inside an escape and dumped it in deep space outside Vaxal system, in the Callia sector. I need you to go pick up that pod."

"What are you talking about? What's in the pod?"

"Your half-sister," she said.

Cade stared. "What the hell is going on? And don't try that no-need-to-know *poodoo*. We're supposed to be done with secrets."

She looked like she was about to object; then she sighed and said, "I'm en route to the Gree Enclave. Darth Maladi is somewhere inside."

"The Gree? They never let anybody inside their space."

"Exactly. I'm going to smuggle myself inside with cargo bound for Maladi's laboratory. It's going to be dangerous and I didn't want Gunner to get more involved than she already was, so I stunned her and dropped her in an escape pod."

Cade tried to parse that story; no matter how incredible it sounded he believed it, both because of his mother's tone, and because it sounded like exactly the sort of thing she would do.

"Gunn's gonna love you for that. But why are you sending *me* to pick her up? I'm supposed to be dead, remember? Call the empress and have her send someone." Though he wasn't going to admit it, he was ready to burn jets for Gree space if it would help his mother.

"Gunner already knows you're alive. She eavesdropped on our last call." Morrigan smiled faintly. "Apparently I trained her better than I knew. As for your second point- if I told the empress what I know now, she'd muster a fleet of ships and march on Gree space demanding they give up Maladi. That would just give her warning and she'd find someplace else to hide in."

Cade shook his head and wondered if his mother's long-standing rivalry with Maladi was clouding her judgment. "The empress isn't that stupid."



"It's not a risk I can take, not until I know exactly where Maladi is. I'll be transferred from my current ship to a Gree transport at Asation, which will take me the rest of the way. Cade, I need you to pick up Gunn. Her air supply won't last forever. Where are you now?"

"Esseles," he said. He wasn't even going to try explaining all that had happened recently.

"It should be a straight shot up the Corellian Run for you."

In the opposite direction from the Gree Enclave, he thought. He forced himself to think rationally; he'd have to crawl across half the galaxy to get from the Callia sector to the Gree Enclave, taking several days. If he went straight to Gree space, Gunner would probably die in that pod, and he still wouldn't be able to help his mother, not unless he knew exactly where to find her.

He saw that he had no choice, and that his mother had arranged it exactly so. Through gritted teeth he said, "Damn it, Mom. You never make things easy."

"No, I don't," she said without pride. "I'm still two days from Gree space myself. If you go pick her up now, then come after me, you'll be less than two days behind."

"Two days is a long karking time in a secret Sith lab."

"I'm quite capable of taking care of myself," she said, and he couldn't tell if it she meant it or was just deflecting. Truth be told, he barely understood anything about his mother.

But he was aware of what he'd been saddled with. At least this time, he thought sourly, he was shouldering part of his mom's legacy instead of his dad's. Hopefully the Corde side wouldn't weigh nearly as heavy as the Skywalker's.

"Will you do it, Cade? Will you leave now?"

"You're not really leaving me with a choice."

"Then you'll go."

He scowled and nodded.

"Good. Thank you. When Gunner wakes up she'll be in a foul mood--"

"When is she not?"

"Tell her I'm sorry, but I did what was best for her."

Apologies weren't his mother's style. He stared at her holo hard, wondering if she expected to come back from Gree space. As always, Morrigan refused to give answer.

"Tell her yourself," he said.

"I will, when I can. But make sure she knows, Cade."

"Yeah. Sure." As always, she left him with no choice.

"And can you still touch the Force?"

"I've had no problem."

"Be careful. There's no telling how long that could last. This thing looks to be spreading via airborne pathogen, and you can be sure it's already spread from Coruscant to a thousand worlds. It could be everywhere by now."

The idea of losing the Force entirely frightened him in a way he hadn't expected; he'd once wished himself rid of those powers entirely, but that had been a different time, a different man.

"Cade," she said, "We ran into two Sith on Ord Vaxal. I'm pretty sure neither of them could use the Force either."

He frowned. "You sure?"

"One of them was Darth Talon. I know you're familiar with her, and how she fights. If she *had* been using the Force, neither I nor your sister would be alive right now."

"Then are you sure this is Maladi's doing? It could be somebody else."

"No, I'm sure it's her. I think she'd working separately from the other Sith. Cade, if Talon could be infected, there's no telling how far this has spread. You need to be careful."

"I'll watch out."

"I guess that's all you can do," Morrigan swallowed, considered, then said, "Goodbye, Cade. And thank you. I'll see you around."

And with that, her holo shut off. Cade didn't bother trying to re-open the line; he had nothing to say to her anyway. With a groan he pushed out from the cockpit and made his way out the ship. He nearly forgot what he'd come here for and had to double back to pick up the box of ingots.

After going back inside the Thrumble Foundation complex, he found everyone in the laboratory where he'd left them. The tall assassin droid was on his feet, flanked by C-3PO and R2D2. Blue was examining some of the machinery curiously and Jariah, bless him, was trying to put some moves on Guri. They all saw Cade's expression when he walked in and knew something was wrong.

"What is it, Cade?" Deliah went to him immediately.

"First things first," he sighed and held the case of ingots out for Guri. "Your payment."

She took the case, opened it, and needed only a second to tally them. Her damage from the fight had been repaired, and her smile was very human as she said, "Thank you. I can honestly say you and your friends are the most... interesting clients we've had here."

"Sorry about the mess," Jariah offered.

"That wasn't your fault. I take it you'll be going now?"

"That's the score of it," Cade said.

"Do we have a location for Ania yet?" asked AG-37. Cade sensed the concern in that tinny voice.

"This is something else. We're hauling for the Vaxal system next, out by Hutt space."

"What's out there?" asked Deliah.

"I'll explain on the way," Cade said. It would take a while and it might rouse some arguments; plus, he didn't want to get into it in front of Guri. He turned to the droids and said, "I know you all wanna wait to hear from your friends, but this is something I gotta do. If you want to hitch a ride, fine. If you want to hold tight and find some way to help the others, that's good time. Way I figure it, we're all even."

AG-37 took a moment to consider, but R2-D2 whistled and wheeled over to Cade. As the astromech nudged his leg affectionately Cade chuckled and patted the droid's blue dome. "Well, I guess that one's settled." Not that it had ever really been in doubt.

C-3PO heaved a long-suffering sigh. "Oh, all right, Artoo. I suppose I'll come along, though I'm still quite concerned about Mistress Kyra."

"We will reconvene with them eventually. I am sure of it." AG-37's twin photoreceptors focused on Cade. "Procuring a ship to take me from this place on short-notice may be difficult. I will go with you."

"Not a problem. Can't complain about passengers who don't use up food or bunk space," Cade smiled. There was no telling what they were flying into and he didn't mind having an assassin droid as backup, not one bit.

Guri was perceptive, and she saw through his bravado. She turned her gentle frown to AG-37 and said, "When this all gets resolved, please let me know what happened."

"Of course, Mistress," said AG-37.

"Care about your customers that much?" asked Jariah.

"Sometimes." The frown became a brittle smile. "But I feel like I'm catching a piece of a much longer story. I caught a little before, a long time ago. I'm still interested in how it plays out."

R2-D2 hummed softly and C-3PO said, "Believe me, Mistress Guri, I quite understand."

AG-37 added nothing, but Cade was sure he understood too, understood in a way not Cade himself, nor Jariah or Blue or any other organic, really could. For the flesh and blood there was only so much time; it ran by fast and never enough.

All the more reason to get moving, Cade knew. He gave Guri a farewell nod and made for the exit. His friends and allies- flesh and blood, circuitry and steel- all moved to join him.

Ania knew spaceships. She could tell from the brief lurching motion and the change in engine-sound that they'd exited hyperspace. Still bound and locked in her prison cell, she felt the whole craft tremble as it shuddered through atmospheric entry, braced herself against the wall as they decelerated for landing, and listened as the engine-roar died away as was replaced by the faint whine of repulsor-generators that set them down almost gently on a flat landing pad.

She waited almost five minutes after touch-down, longer than expected, for the door to open and the black-armored Mandalorian to walk into the room. He had his helmet on this time, and he'd brought a friend. His partner wore gold-colored armor, and from the height and frame Ania guessed it was a woman. She held a blaster pistol in one hand and kept it aimed at Ania while the one in black unlocked the barred door using an old-style metal key.

He swung it open and looked down on Ania, still sitting on the bunk with hands and feet bound. "We're here," he said.

“I noticed.”

“I’m going to cut your ankles free but not your hands. Try anything stupid and Tes will shoot you again. Got me?”

“Definitely.”

Ania’s instincts told her to strike back anyway, to fight until she could run, but her instincts always told her that. This time she resisted them and let black-armor flick out a small knife. He bent low and cut her legs free, then pocketed the knife, backed out of the cell, and gestured for her to follow.

She hadn’t been awake when they’d brought her into this ship and she paid close attention now as they walked her down a corridor, around a bend, and into a main hold. Three more Mandalorians, all masked and armored, were waiting by an open portal. She marked the broad, tall one in silver as the one who’d shot her back on Esseles. Through the doorway gap Ania could make out the slant of a landing ramp and a scrap of the world outside. It was night where they’d landed, and ambient glow from the ship’s exterior lights marked out tree-trunks and low brush. They seemed to have set down in a forest clearing, which meant she’d have plenty of places to hide if she broke free of her captors, but no places to run for help.

The three Mandos who’s been waiting walked outside first. As she peered down the ramp Ania asked, “Are you going to at least tell me what planet I’m on?”

The Mando woman jabbed her blaster-tip between Ania’s shoulder-blades. “Get moving, Solo.”

Ania took that as a no. She walked down the ramp, gold-armored Tes right behind her, and when she reached the bottom she took a few tentative steps out from beneath the parked freighter and looked around. Even seeing just a slice of it in the dark she marked it as a Corellian YV-5200, probably heavily modified. These five Mandos seemed to be it, unless there was more inside the ship. The didn’t bother to close the ramp, which seemed to indicate there were, but it was hard to tell.

They certainly seemed to be the middle of nowhere. The only sounds were insects singing unseen in the forest, and when Ania looked up at the sky the stars and nighttime black

were both deep and clear, unhindered by light pollution. She had a feeling that, even if she managed to escape into the forest, her only options would be to starve or get recaptured.

The silver-armored Mando led the way into the woods, and Tes jabbed Ania in the back. Taking the hint, Ania shuffled to follow. When she stepped beneath the tree cover all starlight vanished and she stumbled through the dark, nearly falling over gnarled roots and scattered stones. The Mandos, whose helmets surely had night-vision, moved smoothly and quietly through the woods.

After nearly pitching into a tree she couldn't even see, Ania growled, "Hey, can I at least get a light? You went to all that trouble to capture me. You want to see me bash my brains in before you can deliver the goods?"

"She's got energy, this one," said a male voice behind her. It must have been the black-armored one.

"Makes sense she would," said a voice from ahead.

"What does *that* mean?" Ania planted both feet on the ground and didn't budge when Tes's pistol poked her lower back. "I'm not taking another step until I get a light. What, do you think I'll find my way back and steal your ship?"

For a moment her answer was darkness and silence; then another voice said, "Have it your way, *dal'ika*."

The Mando immediately ahead of her released a narrow beam of light from the right-arm wrist of his suit. It wasn't much, but at least it illuminated the ground immediately ahead of her.

"Thanks," Ania muttered, and they started walking again.

The march seemed to last forever. The Mandalorian in front of her held his arm back to cast the light, but it was still difficult for Ania to follow. As she stumbled along she realized that it was cool outside as well, and with only her usual white jacket on she was beginning to shiver. The binds on her wrists were also starting to chafe. At least Tes had stopped jabbing her in the back with the pistol.

Eventually Ania spotted light peeking through the trees beyond. She got close enough to make out a series of low domed structures made from wood and settled into a forest clearing. It looked rustic and primitive, and she was more perplexed than ever about who'd arranged her abduction.

She followed the Mandalorians to the largest dome. It looked over ten meters in diameter, maybe three meters high at the center. A short flight of stairs led into a small door tucked halfway beneath ground level. Ania looked over her shoulder; light from inside gleamed across Tes's golden helmet.

"Am I finally going to get some answers?"

"Only if you go inside."

Once again, Ania didn't have much choice. She walked down the stairs and through the door. The inside of the dome was a broad circular chamber with a primitive fire crackling in the center and smoke rising up through a hole at the dome's peak. A half-dozen people were already inside, some wearing armor plates, others not. They covered a full spread, from two boys who looked barely into their teens to a woman with all-gray hair pulled into a tight bun. Once they were all inside Ania's captors began removing their helmets. Silver-armor was a man with a broad face and thick graying beard. Black armor was the blunt-looking blond man. Gold armor, Tes, was an auburn-haired woman maybe ten years older than Ania.

For a long moment it seemed like all of them froze to stare. Ania avoided their collective gaze and lifted her bound wrists. "Can I get these free at least? Or are we going to stand around all night?"

"I've got it," said the blond man. With the same knife he's used before he cut Ania's wrist-bonds and let them fall to the tight-packed earth floor.

It felt good to have all her limbs free, but Ania needed answers more. Looking around the room but avoiding lingering eye contact with any of her captors she said, "Okay, I give up. Why am I here? What do you people *want* with me?"

The gray-haired woman approached slowly from across the room. Her eyes were dark and soft, but also intense, and Ania looked away uncomfortably. Nonetheless the woman continued to approach, and when she got near enough she reached out with both hands and touched Ania's face.

The younger woman froze. She didn't even think to jerk away. Cold, rough, thin hands caressed her face, then slid

down her neck to her shoulders. Seen in the firelight that woman's face was strangely arresting, not because it was unusual but because it seemed familiar but strangely twisted. As their gazes locked the woman's eyes wavered with gathering water.

Ania wanted to jerk away, but somehow she couldn't. She said, "I don't understand. Who *are* you?"

"It's *me*, Ania." The woman swallowed back tears. "I'm your mother. And I never thought I'd see you again."



## Chapter Twenty

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Asation, the gateway world to the Gree Enclave, looked mostly normal from orbit: a mix of greens and blues and browns, overlaid by drifts of vapor tinted slightly yellow by the methane traces common to most Gree planets. In preparing the container that would smuggle her into Darth Maladi's hiding place, Morrigan had made sure to pack a breathing mask that would filter out the dangerous particles and allow her to intake the oxygen and hydrogen that was also part of the Gree's standard respiratory mix. She'd packed other things too: a blaster carbine, a hold-out pistol, a set of macrobinoculars, two tanks of compressed oxygen for when her ambient supply ran out. Most importantly, she'd included a portable long-range comm device that, on her command, would relay her position and a pre-recorded message back to this ship's computer, which in turn would automatically bounce the message to the empress on Coruscant. After that, Marasiah Fel would be able to handle things however she saw fit.

Morrigan had brought only a few of those things with her during the frenzied rush to hijack Nial Qorlis' ship from Ord Vaxal; the rest had been appropriated from the well-stocked cargo vessel. Qorlis had tried to complain at first, but the sting of another dart- this one filled with mild, nausea-inducing poison- has effectively shut him up.

That had been over a standard day ago, and by now Qorlis looked almost hale as he sat behind his freighter's controls and maneuvered them into stable orbit over Asation.

"I'm broadcasting our identification signal now," sighed Qorlis. "They should be here soon."

"Thank you for your cooperation."

He snorted. "You're a piece of damned work. You know that?"

"You're not the first to make that observation," she muttered and scanned the space over Asation. She marked a number of small stations in orbit, each shaped like two overlapping ovals laid perpendicularly. Long-range sensors, she guessed, probably armed with security cannons. She was more interested in their ships; she'd never studied the Gree much, but she'd heard their archaic vessels were elegant in a way, supposedly using solar sails rather than thrust or ion engines for propulsion.

Morrigan and Qorlis waited in awkward silence until his board lit up. Qorlis checked it and said, "That's them all right. Incoming."

"Then let's get ready to meet them."

Qorlis took the controls and pivoted his ship. Asation's bright face swung across the viewport, left to right. As it swung away, Morrigan spotted a moving vessel accelerating toward them from lower orbit. Size was hard to gauge, but it looked a bulky ship, with four lozenge-shaped subsections bulging out of a cylindrical central hull. The craft was all smooth lines, without right angles or even clearly-marked viewports. Mast-cables many times its length trailed behind it and connected it to a great umbrella-shaped sail made of a shimmering translucent material. It was like nothing Morrigan had ever seen before, and despite her situation it filled her with a fleeting sense of wonder.

"I've set position," Qorlis said as he killed the freighter's engines. "They'll dock in a few minutes."

"Then we'll go down," Morrigan said. "Together."

By now Qorlis had learned not to object. He got out of the cockpit first, and Morrigan followed him to the spacious hold. Qorlis went to the broad bay doors and worked the controls. Morrigan opened the lid to her prepared smuggling crate but waited until she heard the screech of metal against metal and knew Qorlis had completely coupled with the Gree ship.

Stepping into the crate she called to him, "Your assistance was most appreciated."

"Don't mention it," Qorlis said seriously.

"Two words of advice. One: *don't* try to call Maladi and warn that I'm coming. Two: go to the empress instead and beg for clemency. You might catch her in a generous mood."

"I'll think about it," Qorlis said, in a tone that made clear he wouldn't.

He'd flee to the far corner of the galaxy and try to rebuild his career as a low-life criminal, now bereft of the Force powers that had given him a small advantage in years past. Maybe he'd try to warn Maladi; Morrigan doubted it, but just in case, she'd sneaked a thumb-sized capsule of compressed gas into his jacket pocket. Once she had been off the ship for four minutes, the capsule would release that gas and render Qorlis unconscious for at least five hours. She could have easily filled that capsule with something lethal but had decided against it for reasons she couldn't entirely explain. Perhaps prolonged contact with both of her children had left her feeling merciful.

Without another word, Morrigan ducked into the crate, pulled the lid shut, and activated the vacuum-seal. The entire container was rectangular, the size and rough dimensions of a small landspeeder, but Morrigan's section had just enough room for herself and her supplies. She laid herself flat on her back so she stared up at the blank metal ceiling, then tapped on her earpiece. Audio relayed from the listening device she'd put in the hold, and she heard Qorlis say, "I've got everything she'll need. Here's a manifest."

The response was a series of high-pitched squeals, interspersed with clicks and guttural scratches. A mechanical voice translated, "The manifest is received. You have gratitude for compliance."

"Sure, great."

"The transfer will begin now."

Morrigan braced herself for motion. She heard another crate move first, scraping briefly on the deck before being fitted on what she guessed was some repulsor-harness. Another crate was moved after that, and then her own. She braced hands against the interior wall for stead, but the ride

was surprisingly smooth. The feed from her earpiece started to dissolve in static, which was a sign she'd passed beyond the bug's transmission range of twenty meters.

When the crate stopped moving Morrigan closed her eyes and waited, listening to faint sounds from outside she couldn't discern. When motion returned it came as a smooth, steady acceleration rather than the sudden jump of thrust engines activating. The Gree ship was riding away on its graceful solar sail with her aboard, and there was just a tiny lurch when they jumped past lightspeed.

Empress Marasiah Fel had been trained from a young age to handle crises, but she'd never expected to deal with one like this. The Jedi, the Imperial Knights, and the empress had been isolated within the palace's medical ward for three days, and despite her attempts to obfuscate the fact, the news-nets were abuzz with rumors, some of which veered perilously close to the truth.

On the fourth and fifth days she did what she could to assuage those rumors. While most of the afflicted knights remained under observation, Marasiah left the hospital and began going about the daily business of government in-person. She made a live statement about the upcoming senate elections and the amnesty she'd grant to certain political prisoners, then left before reporters in the audience could swamp her with questions. She'd brought along with a handful of senior Knights to display, including her uncle, her husband, and Ganner Krieg himself. She started to regret the last choice; the man looked absolutely miserable, and she hardly blamed him.

After the brief press conference she made herself visible in other ways. Taking Antares and Ganner with her, she boarded her private airspeeder and travelled to the naval headquarters complex located on the opposite side of the government district. Once they arrived a small honor guard was waiting, including two of her top admirals. Eduard Fenel was a fierce fighter who'd been loyal to her father throughout his years of exile; Rulf Yage had switched sides at the end of the war. Together they represented the halves of the navy she was still trying to join into a unified force.

On the empress' request most of the honor guard was dismissed. Marasiah, her admirals, and her two Knights began walking along the promenade that stretched along the outer wall of the headquarters building. Afternoon sunlight slanted through tall west-facing windows and the Coruscant skyline glittered beyond. Passing naval staff gave the group a respectful berth, but through the Force, Marasiah could sense their curiosity.

She sensed it from her admirals more strongly, but neither of them dared ask about her three days' absence. Instead they talked about the reactivation of some fleet units which had been started by Admiral Stazi.

"We've begun recalling more units to our shipyards at Bilbringi and Yaga Minor," Fenel said. "They'll be ready for active tours within a week, but we still need to know where to show the flag."

"Send a few groups to patrol the edges of the Unknown Regions," Marasiah said. She had no knowledge of any threats there, but it was as good a place as any to keep an eye on. "Admiral Yage, what about the repair facilities at Rendili?" The Rendili shipyards had been torn up at the end of the war against Krayt just as they'd been savaged by during her father's war with the Alliance seven years earlier. It was an unlucky planet.

"We've reached production levels of around sixty-percent the pre-war norm," said Yage. "I've authorized the hiring of more construction staff to expedite up repairs, but we're still lacking in raw resources."

"I'll authorize additional funds for increased mining on nearby worlds. Will that help, Admiral?"

"Very good, Empress." Yage nodded. She could tell he was curious, too, about what top-secret mission Marasiah had sent his daughter on, but Yage was a soldier, and he knew not to ask. That was good; if he knew Gunn was off chasing Sith with her mother, Yage's ex-wife, the admiral's composure would finally snap.

"We know Gar Stazi has reactivated twenty percent of his off-duty personnel," Fenel said. "I was planning to at least match that level. In fact, I was considering doubling it."

Fenel's rivalry with Stazi went back ten years, but the admiral was more concerned about missing a threat. This was the closest he'd come to asking Marasiah if there was some big danger she knew about and hadn't told. "I believe twenty percent is sufficient," she told him. "I'll be reviewing all fleet movements Admiral Stazi undertakes, and I'll keep him from intruding in your mandate. In fact—"

She noticed Antares lagging behind and stopped. The admirals stopped with her and she realized that Ganner Krieg had quietly slipped away. Antares was looking for him, head swinging in every direction, scanning the officers drifting up and down the promenade. His face was scrunched in an angry scowl; he felt half-blind without the Force.

Marasiah still had it, and she used it. She searched for echoes of him in the crowd: loyal Ganner, thoughtful Ganner, dutiful and self-sacrificing Ganner, the perfect counterweight to her brash husband.

She found a presence, muffled and strangely warped the way all her Knights felt now, but still definitely Ganner's. It felt like the Ganner she'd known was on the verge of shattering.

"Antares, *come*," she commanded, and started running back the way she'd come.

The two admirals froze in shock, then tried trotting after her. Other pedestrians hurried out of her way but kept watching. All eyes were on her when she reached one of the glassy doors that opened onto the promenade's narrow exterior walkway. She pushed the door open and rushed through, Antares right behind her. Wind blew hard, rustling her long hair; setting sunlight glared in her face and rebounded off the windows rising behind her. She squinted and followed the Force to find Ganner. He'd hopped over the walkway's railing and stepped out onto one of the sensor vanes jutting horizontally out from the side of the building. His red cape and ponytail flailed in the breeze, and beneath him the chasms of Coruscant yawned emptily. He was staring straight ahead into nothing, eyes empty.

Even without the Force, Antares knew what he was going to do. "Ganner, come back! Get away from there!"

Marasiah and Antares edged closer to the base of the sensor vane. She called, "Master Krieg, look at me! Master Krieg!"

He didn't turn, didn't budge. The sensor wave buckled slightly in the wind; with relief she saw Ganner shifted footing to avoid falling.

When he reached the vane Antares put both hands on the railing, ready to vault himself over. Marasiah grabbed his shoulder, pulled him back, and said to Ganner, "Master Krieg, there's no purpose in this."

Still no reply. Antares said, "What happened was *not* your fault! We will *fix* this! Just come *back*."

Slowly he shifted, turned halfway around to look at Marasiah and Antares. Likely there was a huge crowd on the other side of the window watching the drama, ready to spew a thousand new rumors about what was going on. Marasiah didn't care. She told Ganner, "You still have a duty, Master Krieg!"

"I've *failed* my duty!" His voice choked; his eyes were sunken but dry. "I've ruined us all!"

"This was *not* your fault!" Antares called. "You were a victim, Ganner, just like the rest of us. We are *all* in this together and the only way we'll get *out* is together. Now step back!"

Ganner didn't move. The wind blew again and this time he allowed himself to bend with it, but he didn't quite tip from his perch.

"Master Krieg," said Marasiah, "I will not let you fall. Do you understand me? I will *not*. Please, come in now, under your own power."

The hollowness in his eyes grew deeper. One more gust of wind came, and he did not brace himself. The vane trembled, and Ganner tipped. Antares shouted. Marasiah bent over the railing so hard it pressed into her stomach, reached out with the Force, and caught Ganner as he fell.

Even as her heart raced she concentrated and lifted him upward, past the railing and over the railing, then set him down on the walkway beside her and Antares. Ganner didn't even try to stand. He collapsed like a broken droid on the hard pavement, limbs trembling. His body contracted on

itself, curling into a fetal position, shaking all the time, and she could see tears gleaming on his face.

Marasiah dropped to one knee beside him, put her hand on his head, and used the Force to gently push him into unconsciousness. Only then did her heart cease to pound. Still crouched she looked up at Antares, saw his grim face, then saw the crowd pressed against the window behind him. She flinched and looked away, but there was Ganner lying in front of her. He seemed not the source of this disaster but the face of things to come.

*Mynock* glided through empty space with only stars visible through the cockpit's forward viewport, but Cade leaned forward eagerly, waiting for one of those light-specks to swell and become a drifting escape pod. Deliah had the ship's helm, Jariah the co-pilot's seat. Cade hung over the latter's chair and three droids watched from behind him. He couldn't remember the last time his ship had felt so crowded.

Eyes on his console Jariah said, "That beacon's still transmitting. I'd say five hundred kilometers dead ahead."

"I'll cut thrust," Deliah said, and Cade could feel the ship start to decelerate.

As *Mynock* glided forward, C-3PO said, "It is most curious that your half-sister of all people is the one we are rescuing. I find it quite unusual that your mother and her daughters were assigned to this cover mission together. Standard procedure for Imperial intelligence operatives—"

"They're not usual operatives, and the Empire ain't what you knew," Cade sighed. The long ride out to the Vaxal system had been spent giving C-3PO history lessons. It had been a decent distraction at first, but by now Cade was getting sick of it. "My guess is, the empress stuck my sister with our mom because she thought Gunner was the only one who could keep a handle on her."

"If you don't mind my saying, it seems that the empress made a grave tactical error."

"Did she though?" grunted Jariah. "We know where Corde's going, more or less. She's just got a head start."

A head start of around two standard days, Cade thought grimly. That was more than enough time for things to go bad,



especially when Maladi was involved and *especially* if the Force was really going quiet galaxy-wide. That was another thing they'd had to talk about on the outbound flight. Cade could still feel the Force with him now; he could sense Jariah and Blue as clear as ever. He had no idea how long that would last. If this virus or whatever had been in circulation for over a week he could have picked it up on Mon Gazza, Socorro, or Esseles. On the first two planets he'd been sharing air with sentients from all over the galaxy and any one of them could have transmitted. He was frankly surprised not to have exhibited the symptoms yet, and he planned to use his good fortune while it lasted.

"I believe our target is up ahead," AG-37 said.

Cade squinted at the starfield. His eyes weren't as good as the assassin droid's photoreceptors but he eventually spotted one white point steadily growing in size until it became a drum-shaped metal container tumbling lazily through deep space.

"That's it all right," Cade slapped the back of Jariah's chair. "Lock on with the tractor beam and hook it to the airlock."

"Can do."

On his way out the cockpit Cade said, "The rest of you, stay here. I'll bring Gunner in."

"Be careful," Jariah called, "I hear she bites."

"Not funny," he grunted, then trotted down the corridor to the airlock vestibule. Cade watched through double-layered portholes as the escape pod's hatch sealed magnetically with *Mynock's* airlock, then listened to the hiss of air as the vestibule matched pressure with the pod. Before opening the vestibule door, Cade took two portable air filters from a rack near the door and strapped one of them over his nose and mouth.

With the pull of a lever, the doors to the vestibule swung opened. Cade stepped inside the chamber and tried to pull open the escape pod's hatch from the outside. A lot of them were rigged to only open when unlocked from the inside, a counter-measure designed to protect from pirates and raiders. All well and good, assuming the passenger inside hadn't passed out from exhaustion, starvation, or water deprivation. Cade was about to go back outside the vestibule and fetch a

cutting torch when he heard metal scrape on the other side. Deadbolts unlocked and the hatch unsealed. Its round metal door swung outward and forced Cade to step back.

That was when a trio of laserblasts flashed out of the pod. Cade ducked, swore, and called on the Force to catch the next two blasts in his gloved hand. Finally, with an invisible tug, he wrenched the blaster pistol through the air and into his palm.

Finally he got a good look inside: Gunner Yage, slumped against the pod's back wall, pale and sickly and panting for air, staring back at him with an expression of shock and loathing.

"*Chess ko, pateesa*," Cade said. "How about a little thanks?"

"You," Gunner wheezed.

"Yeah, me. Surprised? Just like our mom to leave you in here with a loaded blaster."

"I kept it... hidden."

Cade stepped over the airlock rim and into the pod. The air was thin and cold inside and first thing he did was strap the air filter over her face. Then he took her under the shoulders and pulled her upright.

"I can walk." Gunner jerked free, but staggered and nearly fell as she moved into the vestibule. Cade put an arm around her waist and this time she didn't object as he helped her to *Mynock's* crew lounge. After nearly collapsing on the sofa Gunner stopped to take three deep breaths, then reached for her mask.

"Don't take that off," Cade said as he tugged off his own mask. "As far as I'm concerned you're a plague vector and I don't wanna breathe whatever Sith disease you're spewing out. No offense."

Gunner let her hands fall to her sides. "None taken. I guess. But the Force... you can still use it."

"Like when I grabbed that blaster from your hand? Yeah, I guess I can. Don't ask me for how long. I've been around lately so for all I know I'm already infected." Cade went over to the table and picked up a half-liter container of water. He pulled out the extendible straw, handed it to Gunner, and said, "You can drink from under your mask, right?"

"Probably," she said, and took the container. When she stuck the straw beneath her mask and into her mouth she started sucking in water and didn't stop until she'd nearly emptied the thing. When she finally put the container down and re-affixed the mask to her face she said, "I can't believe she sent *you* after me."

Cade snorted. "You know how to make a guy feel special. How about a *thank you*, or a *gee, I'm glad you're not dead?*"

"Thank you," Gunner said.

Cade waited. She couldn't quite bring herself to say the rest and he rolled his eyes. At the same time a call bounced down the corridor from the cockpit: "Hey, you kill each other yet?"

"We're still thinking about it," Cade told Jariah. "You can let the pod go and get ready to head for the Gree Enclave."

When she heard those words Gunner stiffened. "I need to use your comm signal," she said.

"What for?"

"I need to inform the empress where Corde's gone. It's my *job*." She stared at Cade hard. "You know what one of those is, right?"

Cade ignored the barb and considered. Their mother had claimed she wanted to find the exact location of Maladi's hidden base within Gree space before informing Marasiah Fel, on the idea that the empress might overplay her hand and drive Maladi deeper into hiding. Cade wasn't sure if that logic held and he wondered if his mother's judgment wasn't partially clouded by her feelings toward Maladi or by something else.

He listened to the muffled scrape of durasteel as the escape pod detached from *Mynock*. The ship banked slightly to get clear of it completely, and in a few moments it would re-orient and begin the long lightspeed journey halfway across the galaxy.

"All right, I'll hook you up. But you're not telling your *grancha* empress I'm alive, got it?"

"I wouldn't want to spoil her day," Gunner said dryly and stood up from the sofa.

That was when, out of nowhere, *Mynock's* entire hull shook. Gunner was thrown into Cade and both fell back onto

the sofa. The ship jerked again and Cade went tumbling across the deck.

“What the hell’s going on up there!” He bellowed and tried to lunge for the cockpit. The ship didn’t take any more hits as he made his way there but alarms started wailing and R2-D2 began crying in panic. When Cade staggered in behind Blue and Jariah, C-3PO was saying, “Curse you, Artoo, I *knew* this was a bad idea! Why do you never listen?”

Cade grabbed the back of Deliah’s chair and asked, “What have we got? Who’s shooting at us?”

“I don’t know, they came out of nowhere,” the Zeltron snarled. “Must have been a micro-jump.”

“What about engines? Do we have hyperdrive?”

“I think so.”

“Shields are up now,” Jariah added. “Where’d that damn ship go?”

They got their answer with another violent rocking, though this time *Mynock*’s shields seemed to absorb the damage. A vessel soared in from overhead, engines flashing in their faces, but immediately cut velocity and spun around to face *Mynock* head-on. Cade marked it as a *Nemesis*-class patrol ship, probably armed and shielded and unlike *Mynock* it wasn’t reeling from a few direct hits.

“Puttin’ all power to forward shields,” Deliah said as her hands worked the defense console.

“Blast ‘em,” Cade hissed. “Do it now, Jariah!”

*Mynock*’s forward cannons pounded the patrol ship’s forward shields, spreading fire and plasma across the invisible screen. At the same time the patrol ship pumped out laserfire of its own. *Mynock*’s shields held but more warning alarms sounded in the cockpit.

“It appears our defenses will not sustain another barrage,” C-3PO trembled.

“Really?” Cade snarled. “Thanks, professor, I had no idea.”

“*Professor*? Oh goodness, that takes me back.”

After nearly a minute of blinding head-to-head fire, *Mynock*’s forward canons had to stop and cool down. At the same time Deliah tried to shunt more energy and rebuild the breaking shields, while the patrol ship kept wearing them down.

"We're gonna have to run for it, *mesh'la*," Cade said in her ear. "Can you do it?"

She bit her lip. "I don't know, Cade. It might tear *Mynock* apart."

It very well could; with all their power to forward shields, a sudden course change would leave their flanks exposed to the patrol ship's guns. One or two lucky hits would end them. He was about to tell Deliah to try it anyway when Jariah announced, "We're being hailed!"

"I suggest we answer them," AG-37 said. He appeared to be the only calm one aboard.

Cade gave Jariah a nod, and Jariah slapped the comm console. "Hold your fire!" he said. "Let's talk! *Talk!*"

The guns stopped firing, but *Mynock's* alarms kept wailing. It still felt like a reprieve, and Cade noticed that Gunner had joined them in the cockpit. Still weak, she leaned against the entryway and met her half-brother's eyes.

"I retract the thank you," she said.

Cade skipped the retort; he couldn't blame her. He asked Jariah, "That comm line open?"

"It is, but they're not--"

"We received your message," the voice on the other line said. "You are to stand down and prepare to be boarded."

That cool female voice was familiar, and Cade's stomach went cold. Shock delayed his response so Jariah gave one instead: "We've still got guns and shields, *sleemo*, and if you think--"

"Jariah, wait." Cade clamped his shoulder.

"Jariah?" the woman said thoughtfully. "Then I presume this ship *is* the *Mynock*."

It really was her then. His mother had warned him that Darth Talon was after Maladi, and he'd hoped never to have to see that Sith *schutta* again, but Morrigan had given him a little bit of extra information, the kind that just might save them.

Leaning close to the speaker grille, Cade said, "Well I'll be a son of a gundark. If it isn't Little Miss Talon. What are the odds you and me'd run into each other again?"

"Cade Skywalker," Talon's voice went husky. "Somehow, I'm not surprised you're alive."

“Well, right back at you. I got a feeling we’re after the same quarry. Little Devaronian *cheeka* who keeps to herself and cooks up nasty diseases like the one that made us all deaf to the Force. Am I right?”

“You are,” Talon said. “That is why I’m ordering you to let us aboard. We are fully ready to destroy your ship, but it would do us no good.”

Cade reached over and slapped the comm console’s *mute* button. Then he spun on Gunner. “Mom said you tangled with two Sith on Ord Vaxal. Just two, right?”

“That’s all I saw. And they didn’t seem like they had the Force.”

“That’s what I’m counting on. Jariah, open the line again.”

Jariah gave his friend a *you’d better know what you’re doing* look and turned the comm back on. Cade bent in again and said, “Okay, *schutta*, I’m amenable. Let’s have a parlay. I promise not to gun you down the moment you step into the airlock. Or once you’re *through* the airlock. I also want your word of honor as a slimy little Sith that you’re not going to do anything to hurt my crew, all right?”

A heavy heartbeat passed. Then Talon said, “Agreed. Prepare to couple airlocks.”

Cade switched off the connection and said, “Do it, Blue.”

Deliah didn’t move. Everyone was staring at Cade, probably wondering if he’s gone mad. Cade shook it off; he was desperate, but not crazy. He put a hand on Deliah’s pink shoulder, squeezed it. She took a deep breath and began to shift *Mynock* into docking position.

Weakly Jariah asked, “You think her word’s good?”

“Who cares?” With a flick of the Force, Cade called his lightsaber to his hand. “Mine’s not.”

Lying flat on her back, tucked within the hidden compartment of a storage crate, Morrigan remained awake and vigilant during the entire ride on the Gree ship. Its deceleration from hyperspace was much smoother than an Imperial vessel’s, but the trembling of atmospheric entry was unmistakable. As the ship leveled out and began a smooth final flight to its destination, Morrigan’s heart beat faster; now she’d come to the crux of it. She had no idea how the

Gree, or Maladi, would treat the incoming cargo, but she'd secreted herself into a smuggling compartment that would hopefully pass their first inspection unnoticed.

If not, well, she had her weapons and she had her beacon. Morrigan waited as the ship seemed to set down for landing. A few minutes later she heard the scrape of an outside door opening. She thought she made out a few faint squeals too, possibly Gree speaking among themselves. Then, finally, she felt her crate rise up and start to move.

The motion was so smooth as to be barely noticeable, but she marked when the crate lowered to the ground again. She listened carefully as she heard a few more being set down, and against the faint vocalizations between a few Gree. Then, finally, there was silence.

Morrigan waited, heart pounding, for some hint of noise or motion. Nothing. She counted off on her wrist chronometer until ten full minutes had passed. Only then did she affix a breath filter to her mouth, sit upright, and unlock her hidden compartment from the inside.

The panel slid back and she cautiously stuck her head outside. It could have been a storage room anywhere in the galaxy: tall metal ceiling, high metal walls, all four of Qorlis' cargo crates sitting unmolested on a broad metal ceiling. A stairway in one corner led up to a catwalk that circled all four sides. She scanned for surveillance devices but recognized none.

Morrigan ducked back into the crate and activated the communications relay. She waited with held breath for confirmation that the device had successfully sent her location to Qorlis' freighter. Long seconds dragged on without confirmation and her heart fell. Finally the relay's readout said: UNABLE TO COMPLETE TRANSMISSION DUE TO LOCALIZED INTERFERENCE.

An artificial jamming field wouldn't be out of place on a top-secret base. Still, Morrigan was frustrated. She'd have to disable the jamming to send her signal, and to do that she'd need to scout the facility and find its source.

Morrigan gathered her essential items: blaster carbine, hold-out pistol, macrobinoculars, poisoned darts filled with a concoction meant to paralyze a Devaronian, remote control

for the comm relay. She crawled out of the crate and very carefully sealed it up again.

Then Morrigan darted for the stairwell, body hunched low and blaster pistol clutched in both hands. She climbed up to the higher level and marked the second-level access door. It was high and broad enough to fit a Gree through but the control panel would not have looked out-of-place in an Imperial facility. She tapped a button and commanded it to open, revealing a long straight hallway ahead.

She'd infiltrated enough hostile facilities in her career to know what needed to be done. First, find a computer node and slice into it. Obtain a layout of the place, mark the primary target, and determine the best way to get there. She reached the end of the hallway, checked for security devices, found none, and decided to try her luck beyond the next door.

It was exactly what she'd been hoping for: a box of a room housing power conduit access points and a single computer built into one wall. Morrigan had no idea if she'd be able to slice into Gree networks; it was possibly their structure and syntax was utterly unlike the galactic standard. However, when he stepped close to the node she saw that its control terminal was a typical Basic keypad, as though it has been designed for human-style fingers instead of Gree tentacles.

The obvious conclusion was that it had been, and that meant this facility had been built for non-Gree as well. Probably it had been commissioned by a Sith in the first place. Maybe that had been Maladi herself, but if so, she'd have constructed it without any of her fellow One Sith getting a hint of its location, and somehow Morrigan doubted that. There was a mystery to this place; it would take time and careful effort to unravel, and the first thing to discover was what planet she was on.

Morrigan's fingers danced across the keypad and started bringing up basic information about this place. The text was all in Basic, though the file structure seemed weirdly archaic, nesting informational documents in ways that hadn't been common in generations. Morrigan discovered that she was on a planet called Te Hasa. According to the primer she'd given herself on the Gree Enclave en route to Asation, Te Hasa was a mostly-deserted world that housed the remnants



of ancient libraries. Given the longevity of Gree civilization, their archives probably put those on Obroa-skai and Mrlsst to shame, though foreign researchers were fiercely excluded. Still, she saw how it might attract Sith interest.

Morrigan began retracing her path up the file tree when she heard a soft hissing sound behind her. She reached for her blaster and spun around just in time to spot an aperture opening in the far wall, but not in time to dodge the projectile that shot out of it with a faint *whiff*. Morrigan felt a sting in her neck, reached up, and wrenched out a barb-tipped metal cylinder smaller than her thumb.

A poisoned dart, she thought numbly. That was too ironic.

Her body was already going weak. The floor slipped out from under her, and though she planted a hand on the wall she couldn't keep herself from falling. She landed hard on her bottom but barely felt it; her back and shoulders leaned against the wall and when she heard the sound of an opening door she could barely turn her head. She couldn't lift her blaster either. All Morrigan could do was watch.

The figure that stepped into the room was draped from neck to feet in black robes, bound tightly and cinched at the waist. Arms were bare and scarlet, laced by criss-crossing black tattoos. Yet when Darth Maladi bent low to peer at Morrigan, curtains of black hair spilled down on either side of her face, untamed by the Sith's habitual topknot. Her eyes were dark brown, bereft of the molten-gold irises bestowed by the dark side of the Force, but there was something wild in them. They seemed out-of-place on a face Morrigan was used to seeing controlled and calculating.

"What should I call you?" Maladi whispered, to Morrigan or herself. "Calixte or Corde? Corde or Calixte? Is your true self one of those, or something else?"

Morrigan couldn't have spoken if she wanted to. Her whole body was paralyzed and yet, horribly, her mind was clear. Fading to black would have been merciful compared to this.

"I suppose we'll find out," Maladi said. "Once the paralysis wears off we'll talk, Calixte-Corde. You took so long getting here, I was beginning to think you'd never come."



## Interlude: A Long Time Ago...

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As speeder rides went, it was a relatively short one from the Senate Rotunda to the Jedi Temple, but early-evening traffic in Galactic City was dense and the personal cab that carried Darth Sidious lost precious minutes in the slow-down. It was all he could do to keep the rage from his face. The fate of the Force itself was at stake and it was unbearable that the scales of destiny might be tipped by something as mundane as a traffic snarl.

So much was happening so fast that even Sidious, a master manipulator, struggled to keep track of it all. Just minutes ago the Senate had passed a vote of no-confidence in Chancellor Valorum, the climax of years of backhanded scheming and quiet engineering of the body politic by Sidious and his master, Darth Plagueis. Sidious was one of the senators nominated to succeed Valorum, and he had little doubt he'd win the coming election and ascend to the highest office in the galaxy, Supreme Chancellor of the Republic. Once there he would manipulate galactic affairs with unparalleled power- and he'd have no more need of Plagueis.

It should have been the crowning moment of his life, but Sidious' hands trembled in his lap and his mouth had gone dry. His conversation with Jedi Master Dooku earlier today had shaken him to the core. According to Dooku, the Jedi had discovered someone so strong in the Force he was believed to have been conceived by his own midi-chlorians. The boy was nine years old.

Sidious had met the boy already and felt nothing of him. He was just a short, round-faced, sandy-haired child, tagging

around after Queen Amidala with a look of constant confusion. Dooku said he was a slave from the backwater world of Tatooine. Yet Dooku's former apprentice Qui-Gon Jinn believed this boy was the prophesized Chosen One who would be created from the Force itself and was destined to bring balance to the galaxy, correcting the tilt toward darkness that Sidious and Plagueis had accomplished nearly ten years ago after their month of intent meditation on Mygeeto.

Ten years ago, when they'd won their etheric war and gained for Plagueis the power over life and death, they'd thought the Force bent and supine before them, at last a pliant tool they could use to further their control over the galaxy. Yet now, as incredible as it seemed, the Force had struck back, creating this child from nothing as a reaction to what the Sith had done.

Perhaps, Sidious thought with horror, the Force did have a will after all, and that will was to destroy the Sith. If so, then this boy truly was the prophesied Chosen One. That was what Plagueis seemed to feel, but Plagueis was an old decrepit Muun, a mystic recluse no longer fit to be Dark Lord. Sidious planned to rectify that shortly; right now, he needed to find out what was happening with the boy.

As soon as he alighted the speeder-cab, Sidious hurried up the broad outdoor stairs to the Jedi Temple's entrance. As he neared the door he spotted small familiar forms ahead, silhouetted against the inner light as they left the Temple. He slowed, straightened his blue-black senator's robes, and forced his face into a generous smile.

"Ah, Master Jinn!" he called. "Is that you, Master Jinn?"

Three figures heard his call and stopped just past the door. Closest was a tall man with long brown hair and a beard. Qui-Gon Jinn was Dooku's discipline, and while he carried himself with independent pride it was not the stubborn, aristocratic kind Dooku had. Whereas the old Count of Serenno placed himself in judgement over the whole of the Jedi Order, Qui-Gon held himself aloof from the rest, making his own choices, owning no one explanations. He was, Sidious and his master had agreed, the most dangerous kind of Jedi.

Yet when his eyes fell on Sidious, Qui-Gon allowed a gentle smile. "Senator Palpatine, it's a surprise to see you. What brings you to the Temple?"

"In fact, Master Jedi, I was looking for you." Sidious said between exaggerated pants. It was also good to appear feeble before his enemies.

Standing over Qui-Gon's shoulder his smooth-faced apprentice- Kenobi, Sidious recalled- said, "We heard you've been nominated to succeed Chancellor Valorum. Congratulations, Senator."

Sidious drew in breath and gave a sheepish smile. "The election hasn't happened yet. Frankly, I'm not sure I *want* to inherit the trouble that brought Valorum down. If nominated I'll accept, of course... But that is not why I wanted to see you." He swung his gaze back to Qui-Gon, pointedly ignoring the sandy-haired little boy half-hidden behind the master's robes. "Master Jinn, I've come to tell you that, against my express wishes, Queen Amidala has set herself to return to Naboo. She claims she can raise an army to liberate our world from the Trade Federation. She'll be departing within the hour."

"We know," said Qui-Gon. "We're on our way to assist her now." He gestured back to the landing platform, where another speeder-cab had set down beside Sidious'. "She has requested out continued assistance and we will oblige."

Sidious had known that, but he gave a relieved chuckle and said, "I'm so glad to hear that. To think, I came all this way here to *beg* you to help her."

"I've grown quite fond of the queen," Qui-Gon said with a light smile. "I wouldn't want to see her harmed."

"Nor would I," Sidious lied. He'd arranged for the girl's election because he'd thought her a pliant puppet. She was becoming much more of a nuisance than he'd expected and if she died on Naboo he'd be relieved. "As an elected official, you understand, I cannot countenance her starting a war with the Trade Federation, especially not when we're all still hoping for a diplomatic solution to this conflict."

"I'll make sure the queen is aware," Qui-Gon said, "I think she knows what she can expect of us."

“Good. Master Jedi, please make protecting Amidala your highest priority. And please, keep her from doing anything more rash than she already has.”

Again the little smile. “I will do my best, Senator.”

“Very good. That’s all I wanted to ask of you.” Sidious gave a relieved sigh and let his gaze fall to the real object of his attention. “This young man... Skywalker, is it? I believe we’ve met.”

The boy looked up at him and nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“No need to be afraid of me,” Sidious chuckled and looked back to Qui-Gon. “I heard this one was of interest to the Jedi Council. They say he shows great promise with the Force. When will his training start?”

From his eyes Qui-Gon was clearly curious as to where a senator had learned this. He put a protective hand on Skywalker’s head and said, “Anakin indeed shows promise. For the moment, the Council has elected not to train him.”

Sidious allowed an honest frown. The Jedi liked to indoctrinate their members at a younger age, but if what Dooku had said was true, they’d be fools to throw away one with his potential.

“Is that so? Then what is to become of him?”

“Until the Council reaches a final decision, Anakin will be my ward.” Qui-Gon’s hand moved down to squeeze the boy’s shoulder. Behind them, young Kenobi restrained an uncomfortable frown.

Sidious understood instantly. Qui-Gon was infamous for his casual disregard of the Jedi Council’s orders; whatever their reason not to train Skywalker, this master clearly intended to ignore it and instruct him anyway.

This simple sight- a gentle-voiced man, a timid boy- filled Sidious with dread. He understood them as the most dangerous threat he’d ever faced. With his independence, his compassion, his intuitive grasp of the living Force and his fearless determination to follow his conscience, Qui-Gon was the kind of teacher who could shape Anakin Skywalker into the being the Force has created him to be, one who could undo all the darkness the Sith had wrought for the past thousand years and tip the scales back toward light.

Doing his best to stifle fear, Sidious asked, "Is the boy to come with you to Naboo? That could be... quite dangerous."

"Have you ever seen a podrace, Senator? Young Skywalker isn't new to danger." Qui-Gon smirked. The boy smirked too. Kenobi remained tight-lipped behind them.

Reproachfully Sidious said, "I hope you keep Skywalker and Amidala *both* out of danger, Master Jinn. Men our age have a responsibility to look out for the young."

Seriously Qui-Gon said, "I will protect them both with my life."

Sidious knew he meant it, and he knew there was only one way to save the Grand Design the Sith had spent centuries working toward.

Kenobi cleared his throat. "Master, the queen will be waiting on us."

"Of course." Qui-Gon clapped Skywalker on the shoulder. "Let's get going, shall we? Thank you for coming all this way, Senator."

"It was no problem at all," said Sidious. "I only want to safeguard the queen, and our world."

He watched them descend the stairs and get into the speeder-cab: calm thoughtful Qui-Gon, Kenobi fighting a frown, Skywalker looking like a confused little boy. He had the potential to become so much more; the Force itself had *made* him for that purpose, but right now he was still a child. He was vulnerable. He could be killed in the battle ahead. But, Sidious thought, how better it would be to take this unformed boy and mold him. If he really was the Chosen One, how sweet it would be to turn him off the chosen path and make him into a vessel for the dark side. The Force had fought back against the Sith, but the Sith could fight back against the Force.

These thoughts swirled in Sidious' head as he rode his speeder-cab back to the penthouse registered to the owner of Damask Holdings. Darth Plagueis' abode on Coruscant was as secure as any place could be, but it didn't feel that way tonight. When Sidious entered he found the gaunt black-robed Muun pacing anxiously across the living room carpet, rasping harshly through the breathing mask he'd been forced

to wear since his near-fatal assassination attempt almost twenty years ago.

There was so much else for them to talk about: Amidala's reckless return to Naboo, the looming election, the rule they would supposedly share as joint Supreme Chancellors, though Sidious had no intention of sharing power with anyone.

Instead of those things, their conversation turned directly to Anakin Skywalker.

"I intercepted Master Jinn as he left the Jedi Temple," Sidious explained. "He had the boy with him."

"I saw them leave on Amidala's ship," Plagueis' head bobbed on its narrow, crooked neck. "I had a vision, Sidious. A glimpse of the future."

His master wasn't prone to oracular moments. From what he'd said, those had been more the providence of his master Tenebrous. Sidious asked, "What did you see?"

"So much was unclear... But we can *use* the boy, Sidious. We can turn him toward a darker path... I saw that in my vision. And to turn him, we must first kill Qui-Gon Jinn."

Sidious allowed a toothy smile. "Master, your vision is impeccable. I *spoke* with Jinn just an hour ago. He says the Jedi Council has refused to train Skywalker, and so he will take the boy on as his ward. You can be sure Jinn will try to train him in the Jedi arts no matter what the Council says."

Plagueis nodded feverishly. "Then Jinn must die. That is more important than anything, even stopping Amidala's foolish rebellion. We must let our allies on Naboo know."

"Not Gunray and the Neimoidians," Sidious waved a hand. "I will tell Maul. That will be enough. He'll not fail us."

Plagueis nodded again. Sidious had been walking a tight line in training the Zabrak into his Force-powered assassin. Maul considered himself a Darth, a Sith Lord and Sidious' honored apprentice. To Plagueis, Maul was just a weapon to be used and disposed of, no apprentice at all and thus no breach of Bane's Rule of Two. To Sidious himself, Maul was something in between, it didn't matter exactly what. Sidious cared as little for the Rule of Two as he did for Plagueis' delirious lust for immortality. In his quest to control his own midi-chlorians the old Muun had fallen into maundering



introspection, leaving Sidious to shoulder the Grand Design. Plagueis had been great once, but he'd far outlived his time. Thankfully, something would be done about that soon.

Sidious had planned to continue using Maul as his apprentice once Plagueis was disposed of, but the arrival of Anakin Skywalker brought startling new possibilities. The boy was young enough to be groomed but not young enough to be a useful apprentice the way the Zabrak was. In time, once Skywalker was old enough, he would become a weapon far more powerful than Maul ever could be, but that was years away. For now, Maul would do.

Assuming he killed Qui-Gon Jinn on Naboo. Nothing was more important than that.

Plagueis trembled as he lowered his body onto the sofa. The Muun looked out his penthouse window at the eternal dance of the Coruscant skyline and said, "Even if Maul fails... there are other things we can do."

"Maul will not fail."

"If he does... We will still rule the Republic as co-chancellors. We will find other ways to separate Skywalker from the Jedi and mold him. Still..." Plagueis trailed off, breath still rasping through his mask. Sidious stood beside him, above him. The old Muun had never looked so old. His pursuit of immortality had cost him everything else. "I did not expect the boy," he said. "I did not expect the Force would react to what we'd done to it..."

The revelation had shaken Sidious to the core as well, but with a politician's skill he projected confidence before his master. "Perhaps we did underestimate the Force. Perhaps it even has a 'will.' But what does it matter? The Force has shown its hand. The best it could manage to counter us is a confused, frightened child. In time we'll make that boy into a weapon of darkness and further wrestle the Force into submission. Master, we are *Sith*. We follow no one's will but our own. Everything else, we force to submit. Haven't you told me that, time and again?"

Plagueis lifted his head. "You are so confident, apprentice?"

Sidious laid a hand on his master's shoulder. "In a few days' time we will be the most powerful beings in the

profane galaxy, *and* in the Force. Why shouldn't we be confident?"

"Very true. Very true." Plagueis looked back at the window. "We should discuss the election. Make sure you have enough votes. Or will you talk to your minions on Naboo first?"

"I will speak with Maul. That *is* the most important thing."

Plagueis nodded agreement, allowing Sidious to slip out of the living room toward the penthouse's secure communications suite. In a few days, he thought hungrily, the chancellor's dais would be his. Plagueis would be dead. And, more important than anything, the Chosen One would be ensnared in his web.

And then, once the Force's greatest weapon had been twisted into a Sith tool, Sidious could finally complete the Grand Design. Black joy filled his heart. Even the will of the Force would bend before the will of the Sith.

## PART III



## LIBERATION



## Chapter Twenty-One

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Seven hours after being informed of the situation by the empress herself, a platoon of special-ops stormtroopers from Bilbringi arrived at the Second Wheel space station orbiting Ord Mantell. Four hours after that, *Scarlet Star* docked at the same station, where its crew quickly met face-to-face with their local contact, who had been monitoring the activities of Mandalorian mercenary Thorum Rhal and his crew. Their contact confirmed that Rhal was still aboard the station, with most of his people currently inside the Wheel and not going anywhere soon. With that assured, the members of this joint operation had time to lay a trap around Rhal's ship and prepare for his seizure. With everything in place, all they had to do was wait for Rhal and company to head back to their transport, and the trap would close around them.

Still, without the Force at his side, Shado Vao could only have a bad feeling about this.

Oren Vevec, Hondo Karr's brother-in-law, had joined Shado and Anj inside *Scarlet Star*'s main hold while Azlyn had gone to rendezvous with the strike team. The Imperial soldiers had docked their assault craft at a nearby hangar, one of the pricey ones with sealed blast doors to ensure privacy, while a smaller patrol ship hung in space above Ord Mantell, watching the Second Wheel from the outside. The platoon commander had apparently gone to the station owner and asked permission to arrest Rhal's team at his current location. Said owner- a squat and ferociously stubborn Rybet- had refused to allow stormtroopers to disrupt his station, but a

few agents had gone in plainclothes to stake out Rhal's current location.

A video feed from one of their holo-cams projected inside *Scarlet Star*'s hold now. It was nighttime hours on the station and the ambient lights were dimmed, allowing the sign reading MADAM SORULLA'S ALL-SPECIES PLEASURE EMPORIUM to glow out all the brighter. Patrons trickled in and out in ones or twos, and after three hours of waiting they still hadn't seen anything that looked like a gang of Mandalorians.

"Rhal took a dozen of his people and went in there around the same time the Imps showed up," Oren Vevec explained. He bore resemblance to his sister, with pale skin and dark-red hair. Like Shado and Anj, he was dressed in unassuming spacer's garb.

"That was almost twelve hours ago," Shado said dryly.

"There's no time limit at Madam Sorulla's," Vevec said, "Though she does charge by the hour. Looks like Rhal's people got into some good money recently."

"We'd already figured that part out." Anj glanced at Vevec. "Did Hondo or your sister tell you what they've been up to?"

"Not specifically, only that they've riled up all the wrong people. Which at this point is pretty obvious." Vevec's eyes darted between them, waiting for elaboration. When none came he said, "If you're thinking about going into Madam Sorulla's yourselves and finding them, I guess you could try, but I wouldn't count on it. That place takes up five whole decks and when they say all-species they really mean it."

"What about Madam Sorulla?"

"Bloated and ugly, even by Hutt standards." Vevec glanced at Shado. "I don't think your Jedi mind tricks would work on her, though I suppose you could try."

"I'd prefer to wait here," Shado said. On the empress' orders, Azlyn wasn't telling the stormtroopers that they'd lost touch with the Force. He certainly wasn't telling any Mandalorian.

"Suit yourself." Vevec looked back to the live holo-feed. "Could be quite a wait, though."

"Even your kind get tired eventually," Anj said. "I don't think it will be much longer."

She was right about that, relatively speaking. After sitting in *Scarlet Star*'s lounge for another hour, they finally saw a big herd leave Madam Sorulla's. There were thirteen of them, just as Vevec said, mostly men and a handful of women, all of them dressed in Mandalorian *beskar* with helmets tucked underarm. They certainly weren't shy about flashing their activities.

"Time to get moving," Shado said, and turned on his comm. "Azlyn, do you copy? Rhal's people are on the move."

"We see them," Azlyn replied. The view from the holo-feed shifted as the trooper recording it fell in behind the Mandalorian herd, trailing them from a face distance. "We're heading to intercept now."

"Understood. We'll meet you there."

By the time Shado turned off the comlink, Anj and Vevec were both on their feet. The latter picked up the blaster rifle he'd placed on a tabletop, slung it over his shoulder, and said, "I'm not dressed for a party, but I can come along anyway."

"Thanks," Anj said as she checked the charge on her blaster. "After twelve hours of 'recreation,' I'm hoping Rhal's people will be all tuckered out and go down easy."

"That'd be nice." Vevec glanced at Shado. "You bringing your lightsaber?"

Shado put a hand at the pouch on his belt. "I've got it."

"*Kandosii*. I always wanted to see a real, true-blue *jetii* in action."

Shado let the comment pass without response. Vevec made for the exit first. Shado and Anj held grim looks for a second, then moved to follow.

A gaggle of thirteen raucous Mandalorians in full armor certainly drew attention, and Azlyn figured that at least on some level, Thorum Rhal must have intended that. Since Yaga Auchs had taken over on Mandalore, the warrior clans had mostly kept a low profile, the opposite of what Rhal was doing now, and she had to wonder whether he didn't know exactly why he'd snatched Ganner and Kel Yobis and probably those other missing knights. Having your historic enemies rendered helpless would make anyone cocky.

Before joining the strike team around docking pad 34-F, Azlyn had donned the standard scarlet armor of an Imperial knight. It made all the gathered soldiers- some in white stormtrooper shells, others in plainclothes with plasteel armor strapped on- look at her with respect, even veneration, but it didn't stop her from feeling helpless.

Normally she'd be able to feel their prickled nerves and intense concentration in the Force. Now she felt blind and deaf at once, forced to relying on mundane sight and hearing that provided only an echo of the insight the Force did. She tried to remind herself that these normal men and women were highly trained and thoroughly competent, capable of finishing this mission even without the Force. It didn't reassure either; it just made her feel unnecessary.

The platoon commander, Colonel Sovin, was crouched next to Azlyn in a dark hallway adjacent to pad 34-F's locked entry portal. His white stormtrooper helmet gave him a direct feed from the men trailing Rhal's gang, and Azlyn was relying on him for updates. She, Sovin, and a dozen other stormtroopers waited in silence, and Azlyn tried to count seconds in her head to guess how much longer it would take before Rhal walked into their trap.

It seemed to be taking more time than expected, but it might have been her nerves. She leaned close to the colonel's helmet and asked, "What's going on? Are they getting close?"

"Not yet." Sovin's voice was hesitant. "They're not taking the direct route here but they haven't stopped anyplace yet either."

"But are they getting closer to us?"

"They were. Now they've changed course. Moving counter-spin, away from the landing pad."

Azlyn sighed. If Rhal and company were going to burn twelve hours at *another* pleasure palace she'd go in there and drag them out herself, Force or no Force. She'd played the waiting game long enough.

The corridor went quiet again, and as she resigned herself to more waiting Azlyn picked up a faint roaring noise, muffled through bulkheads but still recognizable as a starship warming engines. Based on their position it could have come



from any landing pad on level thirty-four, but it struck her as a bad omen.

Then it became worse. Her comlink buzzed and she turned it on. At the same time she heard a voice speaking to Colonel Sovin, telling him the same thing.

"This is Spotter One," the speaker said, identifying themselves as the Imperial patrol ship in Ord Mantell's orbit. "We have visual on Landing Pad 34-F. Blast doors are open. Spacecraft appears to be emerging."

"Is it Rhal's?" asked Sovin.

"MandalMotors design confirmed."

"What the hell is it doing?" Azlyn whispered to the colonel. "Rhal's people are still here. Do they have another ride?"

"Spotter, can you get trajectory for Rhal's ship?"

"It's holding tight around the Wheel. Might be moving in to dock at second location."

Azlyn's hand squeezed to a fist. "They know we're on to them. They'll extract from a new location."

"Spotter, *watch* that ship," Sovin said. "We need to know *exactly* what docking bay it enters next."

"Affirmative, Colonel. We have-" The voice stopped mid-sentence, as though the signal had gone out. Then it came back again, saying, "We have six ships fresh from hyperspace and inbound on our position. Scanners mark as six, repeat six Mandalorian Beskad-type starfighters."

"Evasive maneuvers," Sovin snarled. "Defend as long as you can, run if you have to, but watch Rhal's ship. Do you copy?"

"Hostiles coming in fast, Colonel. Helm is trying to evade." The signal started to dissolve in static. "Shields damaged... attempting... lost target..."

There was a screeching noise over the comm and the signal died. Sovin pounded a fist against the wall and said, "All units, ready to move out!"

As the stormtroopers crouched in the corridor rose to their feet Azlyn told the colonel, "If we start a fight with the Mandos in the middle of the Wheel, station management's going to be furious. It could be a major diplomatic incident."

Sovin fixed his black visor on her. "The operation is under your command, Master Rae."

Azlyn stared at her own reflection, distorted by the helmet's curved visor. She knew there was only one order she could give. "Move out now. We'll take them where we can."

Once Azlyn explained what had gone wrong, Shado broke into a sprint and began racing through the Second Wheel's corridors, weaving around crowds of people, forcing himself through places where slow-moving pedestrians packed tight to block his way. Anj and Vevac kept up best they could, but their desire to see Rhal captured could never compare to Shado's pure desperation.

His race to intercept the Mandalorians before they escaped was slowed not just by intervening bodies but by his ignorance of the Wheel's layout. He'd grabbed Anj's tracking device, which overlaid his position and that of the position of the Imperials trailing Rhal on a three-dimensional schematic of the station, but he repeatedly had to stop, summon the holo-map, and re-orient himself as he moved through the Second Wheel's twisted insides. Rhal's people seemed to be moving toward the outer rim of the station, toward the docking sections, but the Imperials trailing them were too few to slow them down. Shado, Anj, and Vevac were closest to joining them, but they could only help so much.

They finally converged with their targets near the entryway to docking level twenty-three. From one central lobby area, they could access all six hangars on this level. Likely Rhal's ship had already set down in one of those bays and was waiting to extract his team. There'd been no further messages from the Imperial patrol ship in orbit and it had likely been destroyed by the Mandalorians' Beskads.

Azlyn's team was too far away but Rhal could board his ship and be gone within minutes. The only hope was to try and delay them. By now the Mandalorians had donned their helmets and their exchanged a strolling pace for an urgent trot. Counting the three Imperials who'd trailed them it was six against thirteen, and the thirteen had better arms and armor than any of the six. Even if the Force were with Shado, he'd hesitate to engage.

But because the Force had abandoned him, all he knew was desperation. When he and his allies closed in behind the Mandalorians at the lobby entrance, he barely felt afraid as he plucked his lightsaber from its pouch and ignited both blades.

Leaving his companions in the doorway behind him, Shado charged into the lobby and shouted, "Halt!"

Thirteen T-visor helmets swung on him but no one raised a weapon. Shado skidded to a halt and held his saber in a slanted defensive pose.

He had to keep talking, keep stalling. "Which one of you in Thorum Rhal?"

The Mandalorians stared for three long heartbeats. He heard footsteps behind him: Anj, Vevec, and the Imperial agents coming to help. Still none of the masked warriors raised weapons.

Finally one man- tall, with maroon armor marked by gold stripes- said, "I'm Thorum Rhal."

Shado hadn't even decided what he's say next. His jaw hinged open and worked for sound. Then Rhal's right hand came up, plucking a pistol from his hip-holster. Shado saw the first shots come at him and shifted stance to block them. The first two ricocheted off his blades; then other Mandalorians grabbed their weapons and opened fire. Plasma bolts came so fast, and without the Force to anticipate them Shado was overwhelmed.

He felt an instant of panic, then pain, scalding awful agony welling up from his right flank. Laserfire kept coming, a blinding luminous hail on all sides. He keeled forward, saber-arm dropping. He tried to summon strength to raise it; then another blast took him in the crook of the arm. Pain shot up from the inside of his elbow, his saber dropped, and his nostrils filled with the reek of burning flesh. Then the pain in his right side faded, leaving only tingling echoes of sensation. Needles and pins. Shado could no longer keep balance; he tripped forward, and the deck came up to meet him.

He felt the hard impact of head on metal, but it felt distant and weak. Shado must have rolled onto his back, because he watched as slashes of light danced back and forth above him. He was too weak to move, and his vision blurred. He felt

washes of pain and washes and numbness, and even the light-show above tried to fade to black.

Eventually the firefight ended. Shado still couldn't move. A dark face appeared above his, and though his sight blurred in out of focus he could see Anj's desperate eyes and working mouth. Barely, he felt her hands on his left shoulder. He couldn't feel anything on his right side at all.

Shado thought Anj was trying to tell him to hold on. He tried to think of a reason why he should. As the world faded to black it occurred to him that the Force was life, and all life was the Force, but the Force had left him and any life without it would be hollow and false. Better, he thought, to die now than live the life ahead.

When Azlyn and the stormtroopers reached the lobby of docking level twenty-three, they already knew that Thorum Rhal had escaped. One of the surviving Imperial agents had told them that, and also that, in his words, 'the Jedi was down.' Azlyn had tried to assure herself that she'd have felt it if Shado had died. Shado, whom she'd known longer than any Imperial. Shado, who'd been one corner of an unbreakable trio: her, him, and Cade.

Then she'd remembered that she'd feel nothing, not even that.

When she sprinted into the lobby the sight of Shado's blue form sprawled on the floor made her stagger. She dropped to her knees beside Anj, who cradled the Twi'lek's head in her lap. Two more men, Imperial agents in plainclothes, stood around them, while a third, their Mandalorian contact, slumped against a wall and clasped his wounded shoulder.

All Azlyn cared about was Shado. Her eyes took in his damage: multiple blaster wounds had torn open his abdomen beneath the right ribcage. Clothing and flesh had charred together and she couldn't tell how bad it was. His right arm had been hit too, at the elbow, and lay twisted at a grotesque angle. She saw that bone itself had been vaporized and only strands of skin and muscle held forearm to bicep.

Vomit rose in her throat. When she swallowed the bile in her throat she opened her mouth to call for a medic but realized that Anj was doing just that.

A couple of Imperials dropped beside Shado. Anj slid away from him and, taking Azlyn by the arm, pulled her back too. The women remained on their knees, and Azlyn still struggled to keep from fainting.

“Shado...” Azlyn whispered. “Is he... Can they...”

“He’s still breathing.” Anj looked back at the medics, who’d shielded Shado from view. “I don’t know. They’ll do all they can.”

Imperial medics might not know how to treat Twi’leks. She opened her mouth to say that, and add that what he really needed was a Jedi healer. She shut her jaw and breathed through clenched teeth; nothing in the galaxy made sense anymore and she needed it to go back the way it was but it wouldn’t. She had no idea how she could live the rest of her life like this, confused and helpless.

“Rhal’s people... all gone?”

“We didn’t get any of them,” Anj said sadly. She squeezed Azlyn’s arm tight. “We need to tell the empress right away.”

Tell the empress that Shado was hurt or dead, that Rhal had escaped, that their grand mission was a total failure and they’d never track this contagion to the source. That they- Imperial Knights and Jedi alike- were doomed, and that she, Azlyn Rae- who’d been both and still served both in her heart- had failed them.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

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The gray-haired woman blinked her eyes dry but her hands still gripped Ania's shoulder's hard. Ania's first instinct was to revolt from it all: her hands, her eyes, the word she'd just spoken. She looked away and tried to jerk free, but the woman would not release her.

"You're not my mother," Ania said. "My mom's dead."

"No, she's not."

"Yes, she *is*. My mom died at Torn Station, by Kashyyyk at the end of the Sith-Imperial war. My dad died there too, and my--"

"Your grandfather," the woman said softly. "My father."

Ania dared look at the old woman again. Her eyes were wide and dark, her face narrow with high cheekbones and a sharp nose. Her mother had looked like that, perhaps. Ania had last seen Marin Solo a decade ago, but she had no holos of her, nothing to preserve her appearance in memory.

"We were all at Torn Station," the old woman said. "You, Benet, and your grandfather were on *Fast Start*. You were loading the ship full of Alliance troopers who wanted to join Admiral Stazi's renegades. I was going to fly out on a different ship, my father's ship." She sniffed and cuffed Ania's cheek. "He wanted to fly out with you. He wanted to see you so much Ania."

Ten years on that awful day was a jumble of memories Ania had tried to suppress, but parts of it stayed with her, vivid and painful like glass shards: watching the weary alliance troops pile into *Fast Start*, the klaxons that blared when the Imperials attacked Torn Station, the panic that

clogged the halls when *Fast Start*'s artificial gravity failed. Most of all, she remembered her grandfather- that slow, kind, white-bearded old man whose name she'd never known- summoning some invisible power to speed them through the halls to the escape pods, and ultimately to throw Ania through one hatch as *Fast Start*'s hull began to tear open.

The old woman's words sounded almost plausible, but Ania revolted from them still. "You could have heard about that anywhere," she muttered, though it would have taken impressive sleuthing skills. Up until Ania had been reluctantly thrust into the heart of galactic affairs last year, she'd been just one more speck of flotsam floating around the galaxy unnoticed.

The old woman didn't seem put off by her reluctance. "Ania, I know you. You grew up on *Fast Start*. You used to get excited every time we pulled into a new port, even though most of them weren't much to look at. You spent a lot of time tinkering with machinery and droids." She smiled wistfully. "You already got along with Beegee-seven, but you never liked Eebee-twelve that much."

Ania shivered; she couldn't imagine how anyone would have figured out which droids she'd liked or disliked as a child. Her mind worked frantically to deny what seemed increasingly like fact. "My family died at Torn Station. All of them. My parents, my grandfather..."

"Arlen," the old woman said. "Your grandfather's name was Arlen Fel. He was a Jedi Master."

Ania swallowed. She was intensely aware of that over a dozen Mandalorians were in this room with them, watching and listening, but she couldn't look away from the old woman's eyes. "When *Fast Start* broke open... He threw me into an escape pod. This... invisible hand picked me up and carried me inside. And then the hatch just... shut behind me."

The woman closed her eyes. A tear rolled down either cheek but she smiled. "I'm glad. I'm so glad he could do that for you, at the end... I always tried to keep you apart from our family. I thought it would be best for you, best for me..."

Ania still didn't understand. If this woman really was her mother Marin, it didn't explain why she'd been kidnapped by

Mandalorians and taken to this hovel on an anonymous planet. “Did your ship get off Torn Station?”

The old woman nodded and opened her eyes. Her hands stayed on Ania’s shoulders, like she was afraid to let go, and wet trails still gleamed on her cheeks. “When I saw *Fast Start* tear open we tried to look for survivors, for escape pods, but there was so much wreckage, and the Sith kept attacking. I thought we had to flee but we should have searched harder.”

Ania looked to either side, at the Mandalorians still watching. “Who are all these people? Where are we?”

“Surcaris. Near Mandalorian space. These people are my...” She stopped herself. “These are *your* family.”

Ania looked at them again. All those hard staring faces belonged to strangers and she couldn’t see any of herself in them. She jerked a step back and finally broke free of the woman’s grip. “Family? Mine? Like... blood relatives?”

“Some of them. Family is more than blood.”

For half of Ania’s life family had been nothing except a memory so painful she’d tried to forget. “So what, you sent my relatives to kidnap me?”

The old woman took a step forward but didn’t reach out. Ania’s feet stayed planted. “I had no idea you were alive until a year ago, when the news-nets started talking about an Ania Solo who’d helped bring down the Sith. I knew it was you. Not just your name. I can see in your face the girl you used to be.”

“So you’ve been trying to find me all this time?”

“The galaxy is a big place. And you seemed to be avoiding attention.”

Ania couldn’t argue with either of those facts. “How did you find me on Esseles of all places?”

“I heard about what ship you were travelling on and who your companions were. Two weeks ago some allies heard a group matching that description got into trouble on Mon Gazza. We searched nearby systems and heard that you’d pulled a big heist off a pirate on Socorro. From there we started looking at wealthy planets where you’d go to spend that money. Eventually we heard ships matching the two from Socorro and Mon Gazza had set down on Esseles.”



Ania thought about that for a moment. "You must have eyes and ears in a lot of places."

"I do."

Ania had no idea what this woman was, what she was doing. She looked around at those hard Mandalorian faces and asked, "What *is* this place?"

"A place to hide. To listen and watch and wait."

"For what?"

The blond man in black-and-gold armor said, "A chance to bring down Yaga Auchs."

It took a second for the name to click. "The reigning Mandalore? What are you, some kind of... rebels?"

"You can think of it that way," the old woman said.

"And you, you're... with them?"

The broad bearded one said, "Your mother's our leader, girl."

Ania stared at that half-familiar face like she was seeing it all over again. The old woman smiled sadly and nodded.

"I don't get it," Ania shook her head. "How could you... how could my mother be involved in this? My mom, she was just a freighter pilot..." She trailed off. She'd always known her mother had kept secrets, but never imagined anything like this.

"This is something I have to do, Ania." The old woman's face went stern. "I made Yaga Auchs. That means I'm responsible for all he's done, and I'm responsible for stopping him."

Ania stared into that face and a thousand protests caught in her throat. In that hard lined face and cold dark eyes there was certainty that could not be denied. Her last resistance broke and she finally accepted all these unlikely, unwanted revelations as truth. That was little help; she still had no idea where she could go from here.

In the end the tracer Guri had planted on the Mandalorian ship led them to a single location. Surcaris was a world covered in green continents speckled with blue inland seas. It was a quiet place with barely any settlements, notable only as an old Mandalorian frontier colony located just outside the borders of their space proper.

Ania was down there, but the task of retrieving her had become far more complicated.

It had started with a headache. During their initial training session, Jao had opened Kyra's awareness to the Force and instilled her with a wordless wonder unlike anything she'd ever known, then retreated to his cabin for rest. Kyra had been left exhilarated and anticipating another session. However, when Jao emerged from his nap several hours later he'd looked pale and gaunt. Sauk had sat him down on the sofa in *Free Agent's* hold and plied him with a cup of caf before Jao had finally articulated why he looked so stricken.

"I can't feel the Force," he'd said, eyes and voice equally empty. "It's just... gone."

"What do you mean, *gone*?" Sauk had asked. Kyra had sat there with them but remained silent; the idea of losing touch with something so miraculous seemed to her tragic and terrifying at the same time.

"I mean I felt this headache, this light fever... And now I can't feel the Force. At all." Jao had reached out toward the toolbox sitting on the table across from him, as though trying to summon it with an invisible Force-grip. It hadn't budged an inch.

Sauk had continued to prod him, asking in earnest confusion how the Force could have just stopped working for him. That had only made Jao more flustered. Voice thick with desperation, he'd asked Kyra to try and touch the Force herself. Quietly dreading the thought that she'd, too, been severed from that power, she'd closed her eyes, forced her mind to focus as Jao had shown her just hours before, and used an invisible hand to lift the toolbox off the table and bring it over to her.

That had calmed Kyra but done nothing for Jao. A few hours later, while Jao fretted over his sudden loss of the Force, Sauk announced that their target seemed to have stopped moving through hyperspace and set down on Surcaris. At that point *Free Agent* had been five hours outbound, and with Jao suddenly deaf to the Force they'd had no idea what they'd do on arrival.

When they'd been just two hours from Surcaris, the next blow fell. The headache and fever that took Kyra hadn't been

so strong she'd needed to lie down; worse had been the realization of all that sorrow and fear. Knowing that she was about to lose touch with the Force was bad enough; worse was that she'd gotten only a tantalizing glimpse before it had been cruelly snatched away.

By the time *Free Agent* arrived over Surcaris she felt cold and hollow inside. That she'd hardly understood what she'd lost seemed to make it worse, but seeing Jao slumped in the co-pilot's seat, face still pale and eyes sunken, proved that his was the greater grief.

Sauk set *Free Agent* into a steady orbit over Surcaris, then turned to the others in the cockpit. "Our tracking device says the Mandalorian ship is parked right beneath us," the Mon Cal said. "I tried using visual scanners to spot it on the surface but all I saw was forest."

"You mean they ditched the tracking device?" Jao asked.

"Maybe. They could also have thrown up a camo-net or used some kind of sensor-jammer to hide their ship. Those are pretty common for smugglers and mercenaries."

Kyra asked, "Are there any settlements nearby? Any place they could have gone to?"

"Maybe. Take a look."

Sauk tapped webbed fingers across the sensor console. A two-dimensional image projected in front of them, and Kyra and Jao leaned close to look. It was an orbital image of the surface, depicting a vast sprawl of trees. Sauk zoomed in on one section of the map and pointed out a clearing within the forest.

"I think these are artificial structures," Sauk tapped five circles in the clearing. "They definitely look too regular to be natural."

"How big are they?" asked Jao.

"The largest one is about ten meters in diameter, the smallest half that size."

"Not much of a settlement," Kyra muttered.

"It may not have to be, if it's just a temporary hide-away," said Sauk. "It could be the Mandalorians, or some smugglers."

"Or it could be some settlers who've been there for decades and just want to be left alone," Jao said, frustrated.

Kyra understood how he felt; nothing here was going as they'd hoped. She asked Sauk, "Any sign of anti-air defenses? Long-range sensors?"

"Not in the clearing. There's no telling what they have hidden in the forest." The Mon Cal blinked large eyes and said, "I think we should drop closer and try hailing them."

"That would ruin the element of surprise," Jao said.

"If they're really the Mandos we're looking for, odds are they have long-range sensors and can see us here anyway. Listen, we were talking about trying to buy Ania back in the first place. We definitely have the hard money to try it."

"There's no telling how much the Mandos will want for her."

"I know. But Jao, you can't go in and fight right now. You just can't."

Jao's face twisted; he wanted to argue with Sauk but couldn't. He looked like he wanted to scream too, and could just barely hold it in.

Kyra said, "What about A-gee? What about Skywalker?"

"If this *thing* happened to us," Jao said, "What makes you think it hasn't happened to him?"

That hadn't even occurred to Kyra. She hadn't tried to puzzle out how the both of them could have lost touch with the Force within six hours of one another. She knew nothing about how that mystic power operated or what could have shut off their access.

"Still," she said, "We should at least let them know."

"Agreed," Sauk said and activated the comm console. "I'll hail Skywalker's ship directly."

Jao crossed his arms over his chest. "Let's hope he hasn't flown off and left A-gee on the operating table."

Kyra wanted to say that was unlikely, but she was certain of nothing anymore. They waited while *Free Agent's* comm system tried to find and connect with *Mynock's*. One minute drew out to two and finally Sauk said, "We're unable to connect with Skywalker's ship. I'm not sure why."

"Try hailing the Thrumble Foundation directly," said Jao.

Sauk patched in another call to Esseles. They waited two more minutes, then a third, before a miniature holo-image of Guri flickered to life in the cockpit.

"It's a pleasant surprise to hear from you," the so-human droid said. "Have you found Ania?"

"Maybe," Sauk said. "We were trying to hail A-gee or Skywalker. Are they still on Esseles?"

Guri shook her head. "No, they left over a day ago. They went together on *Mynock*. I was able to repair A-gee without any problems."

Kyra asked, "What about Artoo and, um, See-Threepio?"

"They went with Skywalker as well. I'm surprised they haven't tried to contact you. Skywalker paid for all the repairs on A-gee and Threepio himself. I assumed he was going to find you and make you pay back your half."

"We've got nothing from any of them," Sauk shook his head. "They didn't give any indication where they were going?"

"Skywalker said something had come up, and they all left on short order. He was being tight-lipped."

"You didn't ask?" Jao said.

Guri shrugged. "It was hardly my business. I'm sorry, but I just don't know. I'll tell you if I hear anything, of course, but my business with them is done."

"We understand," Sauk sighed. "Thanks for your help."

After they signed off, the cockpit fell into a grim, uncertain silence. Kyra was the one to ask, "What do we do now? Try to hail them?"

It seemed the only viable option. Even if Jao's Force-powers had been working, he wouldn't have been enough to take on a camp full of Mandalorians- if that was indeed what they had waiting for them. The former Imperial Knight looked down without responding. Hands rested on his thighs balled into fists of quiet anger.

"I think," Kyra whispered, "we have to try."

Jao's fists unfolded; he nodded without looking up. "Sauk, take us in and prep the comm. Watch out for anti-air fire from the surface."

Sauk bobbed his head in a grim nod and got to work.

Ania and her mother sat in one corner of the low-domed chamber- called a *karyai*, apparently- and sat down in simple wooden chairs to talk. Some of the Mandalorians that had

been in the room left; others lingered but stayed out of earshot. Ania still didn't feel like she had any privacy, but she forced herself to listen to what the old woman, the one she'd known as Marin Solo, was telling.

Her mother had been a Jedi. That part wasn't wholly surprising; Ania had known she was connected to a Force-using family for a while, even if she had none of those talents herself. Marin had been about the same age as Ania was now when she'd left the Jedi Order, voluntarily shut herself off from the Force, and sought to make a new life. She refrained from explaining exactly why. Marin also said that her mother Tamar Skirata had been a Force-using Mandalorian, the great-granddaughter of an Old Republic Jedi. Marin had tried to avoid both halves of her family and focus on the one she'd made for herself: her husband Benet and Ania, her daughter. For a long time it had worked; then the Sith-Imperial War had started, drawing in both the Jedi and Mandalorians. Marin had become entangled with both sides of her family again, and both of them had been present during that awful day at Torn Station.

Ania listened to it all; there was nothing unbelievable and nothing that jarred with her memories. During the last stages that war, her mother had left *Fast Start* behind to help the Alliance and the Jedi. As a child Ania hadn't known more than that; her parents had still tried to shield her from it. At Torn Station, Ania had been reunited with her mother for the first time in months and met her grandfather for the first time. Hours later, it had all gone to hell. It hurt to remember that; she could tell it hurt Marin too.

When it seemed like her mother was finally done, Ania said, "You've told me a lot... But there's more I don't understand."

"I know. There's a lot I still haven't told you."

"You said you *made* Yaga Auch's. That you're responsible for him. What does that mean?"

Marin took a deep breath. "I killed his father, long before you were born."

Ania blinked. "You mean when you were a Jedi?"

"I didn't do it as a Jedi." She tapped the center of her chest. "Not in my heart."

"I... I don't understand."

"Yaga and his father killed two people who were close to me, two Skiratas. One was... like a sister to me. The Auchs killed her because they thought she *was* me."

Ania felt like she was being sucked into a downward spiral. "Why did they want to kill you?"

"Because I killed Yaga's uncle. Gevern Auchs, the Mandalore." She closed her eyes slowly, as though summoning a long-gone vision, then opened them. "That was almost fifty years ago. He was the first man I ever killed. I took his head off with a lightsaber."

Marin must have been a teenager at the time, not even a full Jedi Knight. Ania didn't have to ask how that experience would have settled on a young woman, how it would harry her for years to come. She already knew.

Ania shook her head to clear it. She tried to cut through this long chain of reciprocal revenge that had begun long before she was born. "I get why Auchs hates you, why he's after your family. I get why you want to get rid of him... But you didn't *make* him."

"You don't understand."

"You killed his father, I get that, but that doesn't mean--"

"Yaga was there when I killed his father," Marin said. "I was ready to kill him too, to get justice for Ninet and Dorn. But his helmet came off, and I saw his face..." She closed her eyes, remembering again. When they opened they were haunted. "He was a *child*. Not even a teenager. He'd just seen me kill his father with Force lightning and was terrified. So I let him live." She swallowed. "That was a mistake. I need to correct it."

Marin said nothing else; hunched forward in her chair, those sunken eyes stared into an unseeable distance. Ania shivered and leaned back in her chair. She wanted to get far away from here, to have nothing to do with this woman who'd twisted childhood memories of her mother into a grim specter. She felt like she had on Esseles after learning she was part of some fabled lineage that had reshaped the galaxy again and again. She wanted to get up and *go*, it didn't matter where. She didn't want this legacy or anyone else's. She just wanted to run, to owe nobody anything, to be free.

But right here, right now, she had no place to run to.

She didn't know how much time passed before a young man sporting a trim beard came up to them. "*Ba 'vodu*," he said, "Our sensors picked up a spacecraft. It's dropped out of orbit and approaching our position."

Marin was immediately on her feet. The sorrow was gone from her eyes, replaced by cool focus. "Activate weapon systems. Start tracking it."

"We already are."

"Did you make sure to throw a camo net over the ship?" Marin asked as the other man led her across the *karyai* to a set of consoles attached to a generator that looked out-of-place against the otherwise primitive structure. Ania joined them, indulging the faint hope that help was coming for her.

The black-armored Mando and the gold-armored woman were already at the console. Tes said, "We covered our ship, but they could have still spotted our encampment from orbit."

Marin planted hands on her hips. "What kind of ship do they have?"

"Still working that out," said the blonde.

"Figure out fast, Hondo," the bearded man said.

Hondo grunted and tried to adjust something on the console. Ania, curious, bent close to her mother and asked, "What's... *ba-vodu*?"

"*Mando'a* for aunt. Or uncle." Marin put a hand on the bearded man's shoulder. "This is Liem. Call him your second cousin."

"Pleasure meeting you," Liem nodded, and sounded like he meant it.

Ania just nodded. She wasn't in the mood for more family introductions. Reunion with her mother was trying enough.

Finally Hondo said, "Got a lock on that ship. Looks like a Correlian VE-7800."

"Hold fire!" Ania shouted. "I know that ship. Those are my friends!"

Hondo scowled; Marin said, "You *told* me you weren't followed."

"I didn't think we were." He looked at Ania. "How'd they track us?"



"How am I supposed to know? Don't you *dare* shoot at them."

"What if they shoot at us first?"

Marin's expression went hard, and fear seized Ania's gut. She realized that her mother was thinking about opening fire on *Free Agent*, even knowing what she knew. Marin never thought the woman who'd raised her could be capable of something so harsh. The last ten years must have changed her; it was preferable to thinking that she'd been this cruel all the while.

But then her face softened. Marin relented, "Hail them. See if we can--"

"They're hailing us," Hondo interrupted. "I'll open a channel. You want to talk?"

"Let me do it." Ania stared straight at her mother.

Marin stared back. Ania's gaze chipped some hardness from her mother's eyes. "Do it."

Ania shouldered Hondo aside and bent over the console's speaker grille. "A-gee? Jao? Hold your fire! Repeat, hold your fire! It's me, Ania Solo!"

The comm system was simple; rather than a holo, the response came through audio-only. Jao's voice was enough to warm her. "Ania? What's going on? What's happening down there?"

"*Really* long story. Hold position. I'll figure out where you can land." She looked back at her mother. "You *will* let them land."

Hondo looked at Marin and shook his head. The old woman bit the inside of her lip, then said, "There's a clearing two kilometers north-north-west of here. Different from the one Hondo brought you in through."

"They're going to come here and you're *not* going to harm them." Ania didn't look away from her mother. "I've got an Imperial Knight and an assassin droid as friends and you *really* don't want to mess with either."

"I'm aware," Marin crossed her arms over her chest. "We'll let them through."

"And they can leave when they want to?"

After another tense moment, Marin said, "Yes."

Ania turned back to the speaker grille and gave Jao landing instructions. When he signed off she looked to her mother once again. More softly than before she said, "Thank you."

"I don't like this," Hondo growled. "Soon everybody's gonna know we're here. We'll have to pick up camp and move everything again."

"It wouldn't be the first time," Marin said. "Have we heard anything from Oren yet?"

Tes shook her head. "Nothing. I thought we'd have gotten something by now."

"Have you tried hailing him?"

Tes nodded. She looked worried. Ania had no idea what they were talking about; frankly she didn't want to know. All she cared about was seeing AG-37, Jao, Sauk, Kyra, even that prissy protocol droid who knew way too much about her family line, though she guessed this part wouldn't be in C-3PO's memory banks.

When she stepped outside she realized the sun was coming up. The sky was cast in shades of pink and soft violet; strong light in the east was cresting the treeline and sweeping away shadows that chilled the clearing. As she tried to approximate the direction her friends would be coming from, her heart sank to see more Mandalorians emerge from their huts wearing full armor. A few clasped weapons in hand; others kept them slung over their shoulders or holstered at their hips. They wouldn't allow this to be a happy reunion. Ania looked back at the *karyai* from which she'd come and saw Marin emerge with Hondo and Tes on either flank, both their faces masked by visored helmets.

The Mandalorians all knew which way the newcomers would arrive from and angled to face it. Ania followed their visors, and when the first body emerged from the treeline she ran forward in greeting. Forcing all the worries of the past hours behind her, she took Jao by shoulders. He clasped his arms around her waist and squeezed so hard it hurt. She vaguely recalled them being mad at each other but couldn't remember why.

When she pulled back from the embrace she looked at the other arrivals: Kyra, Sauk, and that was all. They looked lost, tired, and afraid.

“Where’s A-gee?” she asked. “What happened on Esseles? Is everyone okay?”

They were all spilling out their own questions: was *she* okay, had they hurt her, why did a bunch of damned Mandalorians want her, would they let her go?

Marin couldn’t answer a lot of those questions, but not the last one. Slowly, seriously, she turned from her friends to face the Mandalorians. They formed a loose ring around the group, and in the rosy dawn light they looked like gleaming faceless statues except for her mother. Marin stood at the rear of the group, and her eyes locked with her daughter’s across the distance.

Jao grabbed her arm and leaned in to whisper, “Ania, talk to me. How much danger are we in?”

“I don’t know,” she said honestly. “Better keep that Force magic ready.”

He squeezed her arm tighter. She looked sideways and saw his head make a tiny shake.

“It’s gone,” Jao whispered. “I can’t use the Force.”

Ania didn’t understand, but understanding didn’t matter. She swallowed hard, then told her friends, “Come on. I want you to meet my mother.”

## Chapter Twenty-Three

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The metal portal was sealed in front of them, and before they opened it and stepped forward into Cade Skywalker's ship, Eli and Darth Talon paused to ready themselves. Since the Force had abandoned them they'd both been mentally grasping for stead. Their failure at Ord Vaxal had been a humiliation, and they'd been set to return to Saijo in defeat when Eli had noticed the escape pod drifting just outside the edge of the Vaxal system. Because they had nothing to lose they'd gambled to wait and see if anyone came to retrieve the pod. The risk had paid off, or so it seemed. Eli took nothing for granted now. That was why both of them carried blasters along with lightsabers, and why they'd again donned black plasteel armor vests to protect their torsos.

"Be ready for anything, apprentice," Talon told him as she reached for the controls to open the airlock. Her voice wavered, as though she were reassuring herself. As she tapped the button with her left hand she hefted a blaster rifle in her right. Eli gripped his own weapon with two hands, and once the airlock's heavy hatch grinded open, they stepped into *Mynock*.

There was one person waiting for them in the adjoining hall, and not who'd they'd expected. It was a Zeltron woman with blue hair, pink skin, and- Eli thought distractedly- a figure that put even Talon's to shame. The Zeltron had both hands in the air, but there was no fear in her voice when she said, "Welcome aboard, *schutta*. Never thought I'd see you again."

“Where are Cade Skywalker and Jariah Syn?” asked Talon. She had her blaster levelled dead on the woman’s chest.

“They’re in the main hold.”

“What was in the escape pod you retrieved?”

“*Chut chut, schutta,*” the Zeltron said. “Be patient and we’ll tell you everything. And if you shoot me, Cade’ll carve off your head-tails one by one. Just a warning.”

“Get on with it,” Talon grunted, and lowered her blaster a few inches.

The Zeltron nodded and turned around. With hands still in the air but an insouciant swing to her hips, she led Talon and Eli down several narrow hallways before they reached *Mynock*’s crew lounge hold. Two men were sitting on the sofa along the far wall, one light-complexioned, the other dark. The dark one had a rifle cradled in both arms and, without rising from his seat, shifted the barrel to track the two Sith as they approached.

The blond-haired man, meanwhile, grinned and rose to his feet. When when got close enough to the Zeltron he hooked an arm around her waist and pulled her in for a kiss on cheek.

“Give you any trouble, *mesh’la*?” the blond man asked.

“Way less than usual.” The Zeltron lowered her arms. “You gonna be fine here?”

“Yeah, we’ve got this.”

“No,” said Talon firmly. “All three of you are our prisoners. You will stay in this room with your hands in the air. Jariah Syn, drop your weapon.”

The dreadlocked man on the couch didn’t budge. “You first, darling.”

The blonde man seemed unconcerned by all the leveled blasters and creeping tension. Interposing himself in front of the Zeltron he crossed his arms over his chest, baring red cross-shaped tattoos that laced bicep and forearm. He smiled, like this was all some weird joke, and only when he smiled did Eli realize this unkempt roughneck was Cade Skywalker.

He’d known Cade Skywalker once, a long time ago. Eli had been one of the younger padawans and Cade one of the oldest. He’d been inseparable from his friends, the blue Twi’lek Shado and red-haired Azlyn. They’d said he was a prodigy, but also prone to bad tempers and recklessness. Still,

Eli had looked up to the older apprentice as something he would want to be.

The academy on Ossus was a long way off for them. Cade's eyes raked over Talon, then Eli, then back to Talon without a flash of recognition. To the Twi'lek he said, "What's with the outfit change? You discover modesty when you lost the Force? Honestly, that clunky vest just ain't your style."

"This is no joking matter," Talon said with restrained anger.

"Who's the little *bukee* you've got tagging along? He looks young and he's got none of those Sith tats. Is he some kind of apprentice?"

"Yes."

"Well, ain't that something. Guess somebody has to train a new generation. Except, oh wait, they don't, 'cause you've all lost the Force."

"Stop *joking*," Talon hissed through bared teeth "Stop now or I'll shoot you."

Cade chuckled and raised his hands. "Sure thing. I just wanted to see if you've grown a sense of humor since I flew your boss into a sun."

"Eli," Talon growled, "Take his weapons."

*Eli.* The name sparked something small on Cade's face, and his eyes tracked the younger man as Eli removed the blaster and lightsaber from his belt. He stuffed those things into his own, then stepped back.

"Cade might be fine giving up his gun," Jariah said from the couch, "But I'm not."

"You can try and wrestle it from Jariah if you'd like," Cade said as he and the Zeltron stepped back to the sofa. "I wouldn't recommend it though. That man loves his weapons."

"You've got a two to one advantage, guns-wise," the Zeltron added as she and Cade sat down. "Isn't that enough?"

Despite her anger, Talon didn't press them. She said, "I don't know how you survived, Skywalker. At the moment I don't care. I know Morrigan Corde- your mother- was down on Ord Vaxal. She jettisoned an escape pod from Nial Qorlis' hijacked ship and left it for you to pick up. What did Corde give you?"

Cade crossed one leg over the other and leaned back. "You must have some idea if you've gone to all this trouble to hijack my ship."

Eli wondered what Talon would say next, and was surprised when she came out with the truth. "Nial Qorlis is an associate of Darth Maladi. We believe she's responsible for the... affliction that has cut us off from the Force. Corde has him now, which means she can lead us to Maladi, and whatever she gave you can lead us to her."

Cade thought over her response for a moment. "Not bad reasoning. You've just about got it. One thing you missed, though—"

"With you as our captive, we can get to Corde directly," Eli said. With her son as their hostage, they could get her to do anything.

"Bright kid," Cade grunted. His eyes lingered on Eli, then swung back to Talon. "I've gotta say I'm surprised Maladi would do this to her own kind. Got any light to shed on that?"

"I have not seen Maladi since Lord Krayt's death. She's had no contact with the One Sith whatsoever."

Cade's brow creased in thought. "Well, that's interesting. I guess we're all in the dark."

"We will not be, once you hand over whatever Corde left for you."

Cade didn't budge. "What happens then? We just part ways, all amicable?"

"We'll discuss that when I see what your mother left for you. And only then."

Cade looked at his companions. "What do you think?"

"I got no love for them," the Zeltron said. "And no trust either. But they do have two blasters to our one. Not to mention that armor."

"What do you think, Jariah?"

"I can get one headshot off, easy. The second one... that's a little harder."

"Then I guess we'd better do what she says," Cade shrugged. "Blue, go get the package."

The Zeltron started to rise, but Talon snapped, "No. Call your astromech droid. Have *it* bring Corde's message."

“Suit yourself.” Cade took a comlink out of his pocket and flicked it on. “Hey, Artoo. Bring in the gift Mom sent us.”

A few seconds later they heard a sound coming from the corridor through which they’d entered. Talon and Eli backstepped, allowing space for two newcomers to pass: one blue and white dome-topped astromech droid and one rather tired-looking human woman about the same age as Cade, with the same blond hair and light eyes.

Eli didn’t know the woman, but Talon did. “Ah. Gunner Yage, daughter of the former Nyna Calixte, currently called Morrigan Corde.”

Yage followed the astromech into the middle of the room, interposing herself between Cade on the sofa and the two Sith. Eli sidestepped to keep his aim on Skywalker while the newcomer put her hands up and said, “I guess I should be honored you know so much about me.”

“Why did your mother leave you here for Skywalker, and where is she headed?”

“If I knew that, do you think she’d have left me behind?” Yage growled. “That witch- who was *never* my mother, not in any *real* way- knocked me out and dumped me in an escape pod when I tried to talk to Qorlis. Whatever game she’s running, you know as much as I do.”

To Eli’s ears her anger seemed genuine; the Force might have told him different, if he’d had it. Maybe Talon’s ears were sharper; she lurched two long steps forward, hooked an arm around Yage’s neck, and pinned the woman to her chest while her blaster stayed aimed for the sofa. The three sitting there hadn’t risen, hadn’t budged; Jariah’s rifle was still aimed at the Twi’lek but now she had Yage for a full-body shield.

Sitting very still and speaking very softly, Cade said, “What about our deal, Talon?”

The Twi’lek ignored him and started edging for the corridor, dragging Yage with her. When the human tried to jerk free Talon dug forearm into her windpipe, choking her, and told Cade, “I will take Yage back to our ship and *make* her tell us where Corde *really* went. Shoot at us and you’ll kill your own sister.”



Still quiet, still calm, Cade asked, "Is this really how you want to play it, *schutta*?"

"You were a fool to ever let me aboard your ship."

"No, darling," he shook his head and sounded almost sad. "You're pure *vermo* for ever coming on mine."

And then, without warning, Eli's blaster tried to flee his hand. The barrel jerked up; his finger squeezed the trigger on instinct and blasted a shot into the ceiling. He bleated for help, looked sideways, and saw Talon holding tight to a rifle that tried to fly away. At the same time Yage snapped an elbow up and back, jabbing the Twi'lek in the chin.

Eli could barely track what happened next. Jariah shot up from the couch and let free with his blaster; Yage ducked low so his deadly shots could Talon's chest again and again. The Twi'lek's armor absorbed the blasts in a series of sparks but the force of impact took her off her feet and slammed her against the wall. Cade was on his feet too, one hand held out, like he was using the Force to pin Talon there.

Eli wrestled his blaster under control and tried to bring it on Skywalker, but as he heard a door, closed all this time, hiss open beside him. He glanced sideways in time to see the massive two-meter-tall assassin droid right before a long mechanical arm hit him so hard it dented the plasteel vest. The weapon flew from his hand and Eli was thrown through the air- by force of impact of Skywalker's impossible use of the Force itself- and landed hard against the wall near Talon. His head cracked against the bulkhead and he fell to the floor right next to her, dazed and gasping for breath.

When the world stabilized around Eli he saw he was still on the floor next to Talon. Neither had a weapon and five separate figures loomed a half-circle around them, each one sporting a blaster aimed to fire.

"Okay," Skywalker said. "Now we're gonna have a *real* talk."

Frankly, it should have felt more satisfying than it did. Cade had wanted to see Talon defenseless before him for a long time, and the shock on her face when he'd started using the Force had been a pure and simple delight. The thrill wore off fast, though; the stakes they were dealing with went way

beyond his grudge against one Sith *schutta*, maybe beyond anything he'd ever faced before.

After pulling the two Sith to their feet, wrenching their arms behind their backs and strapping their wrists together, Cade and his team moved Talon and Eli to the sofa and dropped them there. By now the whole group had converged in *Mynock's* hold. Gunner had a chair of her own and sat with a blaster in her lap. Deliah half-perched on the dejarik table and fixed Talon a smug grin, Jariah paced back and forth with his blaster resting on one shoulder, AG-37 stood still and intimidating as only an assassin droid could, while R2-D2 and C-3PO stood in the corner, watching quietly.

As for Cade, he was trying to figure out what to do with *Mynock's* two new passengers.

Deliah offered her own suggestion. "What do you say we dump these two out the airlock and get on with our business?"

She said it flippantly, but Cade knew she meant it. Blue knew how to hate as well as she knew how to love. He balked from the suggestion, though. He'd cut down more than his share of Sith in combat, but killing unarmed prisoners made him a little queasy inside.

More, he asked himself if these two were really Sith anymore, since they couldn't touch the Force. Stripped of their powers, they hadn't proven hard to take down. What were they now except a Twi'lek with some weird tattoos and a confused kid?

Maybe that would be Cade soon enough: just one more sack of meat, as limited and fragile as anything else. He'd been trying to keep spitting distance between himself and the prisoners, as well as his sister, but if this virus thing really was spreading across the galaxy, passed from host to host and leaving ninety-nine percent unaware, then it would get to him sooner or later.

Or perhaps it wouldn't. It hadn't yet, and he recalled something else his mother had said: back on Coruscant, the empress alone was unaffected.

That could mean anything, and Cade didn't want to get ahead of himself. He told Deliah, "I'll think about. Depends

if these two can give us any reason to keep their carcasses aboard.”

Off in the corner, C-3PO whispered, “Artoo, are you *certain* he’s related to Master Luke? I struggle to see a resemblance.”

Since he’d been given a good prompt, Cade showed the two captives a predatory smile. Talon didn’t look intimidated, but the kid winced a little. There was something familiar about him, something Cade couldn’t place. He didn’t think he’d seen him during his spell in the Sith Temple, though there’d been a handful of acolytes who hadn’t yet painted themselves red and black. No, the kid seemed familiar from somewhere else.

Cade decided to stab in the dark and hope it hit a soft spot. “Hey, Eli, how do you like your master? You been with her long?”

The kid looked away and said nothing.

“She teach you to unlock all that inner anger yet? All that dark passion *poodoo*? I bet it made you feel powerful. Way better than Jedi school, am I right?”

The kid flinched. He must have been on Ossus ten years back. He’d have been young then, many levels behind Cade, Shado, and Azlyn, but there was still something in that face, in that name...

Eli Horn, there it was. Cade recalled that his father had gotten killed by an angry mob when the Ossus Project had first gone sour. He’d kept on training as a Jedi, though, despite all the hurt that must have brought him, hurt that would have gotten bottled up until he’d ended up in the Sith hands and they’d shown him better use for it.

Cade felt for the kid. He couldn’t deny it, but that too, was something he couldn’t let get in the way.

Gunner was there to remind him in case he forget. She cleared her throat and said, “Whatever we’re doing with these two, we need to decide fast and get moving. There’s no telling how far ahead our mother’s gotten.”

“What’s your suggestion, then?”

“Keep them as prisoners. We’ll have time to interrogate them. They don’t look like they’ll crack easily, but your Force powers might help.”

Cade certainly hoped so. "What about their ship?"

"Keep it. I doubt the computer has much on it, but we might be able to get into their nav system and retrace their course all the way to wherever the One Sith's base is."

Cade hadn't thought of that. "Sounds like a plan to me," he said. He called on the Force to raise Eli to his feet without touching him. Another invisible jerk pulled the kid away from Talon and nearly knocked him into AG-37's immobile metal frame.

"Gunn, Jariah, you take the kid over to his ship. Once it's secure, you three are going to seal the airlock and release docking clamps." He nodded at Talon. "The *schutta* stays here with me. A-gee, you can help me keep an eye on her. Blue, Artoo, go to the cockpit and start checking systems."

"I'd be quite happy to assist," AG-37 said as R2-D2 wheeled out of the room on Deliah's heels. "Once we're underway I would like to contact *Free Agent* and see if they have recovered Ania yet."

"Sure. Once we're underway." Cade looked back to his sister. "Once our ships are separated, we make way for Gree space together, right?"

"Of course." Gunner rose from her chair. "And while I'm on that Sith ship, I'm putting a call in to the empress and telling her what happened."

"All of it?"

"I don't think she'll believe me if I tell her I disarmed two Sith and hijacked their ship by myself."

Cade restrained a frown. Deep down he'd always known that he couldn't play dead forever. He'd made too big a name for himself during the war to stay anonymous, and more, he'd never really expected that Skywalker legacy to leave him alone for good. Hoped, but not expected.

And he'd learned how far hope got you.

Cade planted fists on his hips, sighed deeply, and felt the last two years slip away. "Yeah. Tell her what you have to. I have a feeling we'll be meeting Miss High-and-Mighty once we get to Gree space."

"Then let's get moving." Gunner slipped behind Eli and grabbed his right arm. "Jariah?"

He waved an arm toward the hallway. "Right behind you."

Cade let them march Eli toward the exit. Right before they slipped away he called, "Hey, kid. Your dad was Reikar Horn, right?"

The kid looked back. He didn't say anything but his expression was answer enough.

Cade gave Gunner a little nod, and she pushed the kid out of the room. Cade watched the place where they'd been; it would take time for Gunner and Jariah to secure that ship, and for R2-D2 and Deliah to make sure *Mynock* was in flying shape.

He looked down at Darth Talon, who remained exactly where she'd been since AG-37 dropped her on the sofa. This time, though, she looked up to meet his eyes. He looks at hers, really looked at them for the first time since she'd come aboard, and was shocked by what he'd found. All the Sith he'd known, including her, had sported irises dyed red-gold by the dark side. Sometimes his own had taken on that shade, when he'd allowed himself to go to the worst places inside him.

That dark side stamp was gone now. Talon's eyes were a gentle blue, incongruous on her scarlet-and-black face. It was so jarring he had to look away.

She said, "We are going to Gree space. Is that where your mother and Lady Maladi are?"

There was no point in lying now. "Yeah. You didn't know?"

She shook her head. "What are they doing there?"

"I was gonna ask you."

"I have no idea," Talon said. There was something hollow in her voice, something afraid. It was in her eyes too, those soft blue suddenly planted on a ferocious Sith-stamped face. They unsettled Cade to the core. They said that something fundamental in the universe had been upended.

"Well," he said, "I guess we'll find out together."

As Morrigan Corde was picked up by a set of Gree tentacles and carried like an oversized doll through Darth Maladi's lair, the worst part was that she wasn't even granted the relief of unconsciousness. She was forced instead to watch a succession of horrors parade before her eyes.

They carried her down long corridors carved from red rock into chambers packed with old scientific equipment. She passed dozens of tall glass cylinders, many large enough to fit a human inside. Some were empty, and other contained twisted bodies pickled in brackish green fluids. She barely recognized one mutated form as a human; another looked like the shriveled husk of a nerf.

After that she was carried into another chamber, where transparent cages lined either side. She felt sick inside as they passed the desiccated remains of a dead Bith slumped against the glass. Its skin was flaking and dry, its bulbous head partway crumbled, but old clothes still hung on its skeletal frame. The black eyes, eerily, were still intact, and their dead gaze seemed to hold Morrigan's as she was carried past. Finally the Gree took Morrigan through another set of doors and down some spiraling ramp, past shelves packed with old bound books, jars of pickled organs from alien bodies, and barbed metal tools crusted with blood.

As awful was it was Morrigan tried to burn it into her brain. She was an intelligence agent by training and the key to survival in any situation was knowledge. She had to see everything, remember everything, because anything she saw here might be the key to escape.

When they reached the bottom of the stair the Gree carried Morrigan across a grated floor and laid her on a waist-high table. She was still inert, unable to do more than blink or twitch her fingers. She stared upward at the walkways clinging to the chamber's high red-stone walls. She marked the Gree who'd carried her ascend the metal spiral and disappear, but she heard someone else in the chamber with her and knew who it must be.

Morrigan was terrified. She couldn't help it. Her heart pounded in her chest as Maladi loomed in from her right, dark brown eyes evaluating. If her eyes were dark it meant Maladi no longer had the Force, that she was deaf to it like Darth Talon and all the Jedi, but that knowledge did Morrigan no good, paralyzed and helpless as she was.

Maladi shifted out of view. A moment later Morrigan felt something cool and metal against her right wrist, then heard the click of a primitive metal lock closing.

Then Maladi reappeared. In one hand she held a syringe filled with transparent liquid. The thin needle glinted in the light as it drew close.

“Shhh,” Maladi whispered. “Calm down, Corde-Calixte. You want to move again, don’t you?”

Morrigan couldn’t speak and couldn’t move. She lay there, helpless, as Maladi stuck the needle in her arm and injected its liquid. The Sith witch stepped away, out of view again. As Morrigan listened to feet scrape across the grate and the tinkling of metal utensils, she felt sensation return to her body. It spread out from her arm, a tingle at first, and when the tingle was gone she could move her fingers and twist her wrist within the cuff binding her to the table.

When Morrigan had enough strength to move her arms and legs, Maladi said, “You can sit up now.”

She swung her feet off the edge of the table, then used her free hand to push herself into an upright seated position. Her legs dangled off the table’s edge and she looked straight ahead at Maladi. The Sith woman stood two meters away, well out of kicking range. Her arms were crossed guardedly over her chest and head was tilted so long black hair shadowed her face.

This was the Maladi whom Morrigan had known, schemed against and matched wits with for over a decade, but there was something different about her too. Morrigan couldn’t tell what, not yet.

Maladi seemed to be waiting for her to speak. Morrigan remembered the last thing the Sith had told her and decided to start there. “You said you’d been waiting for me to come. Did Qorlis warn you? I thought I’d taken care of him.”

“You did,” Maladi said. “I didn’t *know* you’d smuggle yourself aboard his last shipment... but I suspected. I hoped. I left him dangling out there for *you*, Corde-Calixte.” She smiled then, bearing pointed Devaronian teeth. Morrigan had never seen her grin before. It was disturbing.

Morrigan swallowed. “You used him to deliver the virus to your Sith friends. Though I guess it’s ex-friends now. Did you know Darth Talon’s after you?”

Maladi shrugged. “I expected someone would be. But what is she without the Force?”

“Qorlis didn’t do only that for you, did he? Since you’re holed up in Gree space, he was your middleman with the Mandalorians. What else did you have him do?”

She waited for a reply. Very seriously, Maladi said, “You didn’t answer my question.”

“What question?”

“What is she without the Force? It wasn’t rhetorical.”

Morrigan blinked. “She tried to fight me. She’d have killed me with the Force, and probably could have without it too, but she was outnumbered. I surprised her, And I was just trying to escape, not beat her.”

“Answer the question!” Maladi snapped. “What is she? *What?*”

Morrigan stared. The Maladi she’d known had been tightly-wound, scheming for scheming’s shake out of an apparent need to prove her own genius. She had, in truth, been much like Nyna Calixte. The Maladi present now was a woman liberated from herself, and that meant she was more dangerous than ever.

Morrigan thought hard about an answer that might satisfy her. She remembered something Kol had told her once, a very long time ago. He’d spoken his concerns that some Jedi relied too much on the Force, and that without it they’d be as helpless as children expelled from their homes.

“A child,” Morrigan said. “She was still fast and deadly and graceful... but she seemed lost. Like a girl looking for her mother.”

Maladi nodded, apparently satisfied. She looked sideways, as though something had caught her attention, but when Morrigan followed her gaze she saw just an empty wall. Maladi kept staring at nothing; seconds passed and Morrigan began to feel unnerved.

Finally the Sith looked back to her and said, “Qorlis was essential. You’re right about that. He worked with Auchs and hired Mandalorians to capture my test subjects.”

“And the other Jedi and Imperial Knights who went missing? That was you?”

“Oh, yes. It took many tries to get it right. Auchs’ people were at the Floating World too, after the battle where so many Sith and Imperial Knights were slain. They scavenged



bodies near death and brought them to me. Those were... fruitful experiments."

Morrigan had expected that, but it still twisted her stomach to think of the beings who'd died in this awful laboratory. From what she'd seen on the way in, this place had been around for many years. Maladi wasn't the first to have occupied it.

Grimly she asked, "How many... experiments did it take to get it right?"

Maladi shook her head, ignoring the question. "Qorlis helped me spread the virus, and not just to the Sith and the Jedi, and the empresses' little followers. No. This is much bigger than them. To get it to the Sith we placed a live carrier inside a hyperspace-capable pod, sent the pod out to where the Sith would find it."

"He explained that to me."

"Did he tell you about all the *other* places we sent pods?" Maladi saw surprise on her face and smiled. "No. Oh, no. You used to know how to ask the right questions, Corde-Calixte. You've gotten soft. Too much time cooped up wherever the empress was keeping you."

"How did you know the empress was keeping me somewhere?"

Maladi ignored that question too. "What I am doing, the new galaxy I'm making... it must be *total*. So we sent pods to the Baran Do, the Korrunai, the remnants of the Jensaarai, the Theran Listeners... We even tracked down the Fallanassi. We were *thorough*, Calixte-Corde. This must be total."

Morrigan swallowed. No, this was not the same woman she'd sparred with all those years. This Maladi was at least partially mad; unfortunately, she was also still a genius.

"What, exactly, are you trying to do?"

"You know already. You understand. Jedi, Sith, Imperial Knight, all the other schools of the Force. What is the thing that binds them? What is the fear they all share?" Maladi's voice dropped to a stage whisper, as though imparting vital truth. "*Silence.*"

"But why are you cutting them off from the Force? You're a Sith."

“*Was* Sith,” Maladi corrected. “There are no Sith anymore. No Jedi, no Imperial Knights. No Fallanassi, no Jensaarai, no Baran Do, no Theran Listeners... just children. Living in silence, lost, trying to find their way.”

Morrigan was speechless. She’d heard of Jedi voluntarily giving up their Force powers, but not Sith. That Maladi would seek to deprive every Force-user in the galaxy of their sacred talent shocked her. That she’d pulled it off was astounding.

Maladi uncrossed her arms and held them wide. “Where are we, Corde-Calixte?”

“Te Hasa,” Morrigan muttered.

“Yes, but what *is* this place? Do you have any idea?” Maladi shook her head. “No. Of course you don’t. How could you? This is an old place. It existed long, long before us.”

“I guessed that from the look of some of those bodies.” Morrigan tried for glib. “Those Gree don’t do housecleaning?”

“The Gree... The Gree are special. So special. The one who carried you in here, Rakat’l, has been in this place for three hundred years. Three *hundred*.”

It was harder to think of something to say to that. “That’s a long time to stay on one job.”

“Oh, they have been remunerated all this time. That’s why I found this place, you see? No, you don’t see. Let me explain. Let me give you knowledge. You love knowledge, don’t you, Corde-Calixte?”

Maladi paused, awaiting confirmation. Morrigan nodded, and she was off again.

“There was time, before Darth Krayt fell, before he became obsessed with your son and let Roan Fel and Gar Stazi outmaneuver him. When Lord Krayt ruled supreme, he tasked me to find the relics of Sith Lords past. I *love* knowledge, Corde-Calixte. I lust for it and I chased it. I uncovered some relics of Darth Sidious- you call him Palpatine- it doesn’t matter where. I traced them to the lair of *his* master Darth Plagueis and found a place called Aborah. There were still some secrets there, and I traced things further back, from Plagueis to Tenebrous to Acheron.”

She tilted her head back and looked up the room's tall shaft. "This was *his* place. Darth Acheron labored for decades here. Experimenting. Scheming. Researching. Acheron and I, we were of like mind. Acheron treasured knowledge. He was a scholar. A diplomat. He made allies among the Gree; I'm sure the Force helped him with that. Te Hasa was- is still- their library world. Acheron gathered samples of their tomes here, their records, their catalogs, their histories that go back to the departure of the Celestials and the dawn of civilization. Rakat'l and the others have been laboring here, translating their libraries into Basic for three *hundred* years, all the while funded by one of Plagueis' endowments. Plagueis was a rich, rich Muun."

Maladi's face twisted in another sharp-toothed smile. "Don't you understand the genius of it? The Sith operate on a scale beyond vermin minds. Their design is drawn on a map of centuries."

"Not anymore," Morrigan whispered.

Maladi grew sober. "Yes. Exactly. It's all over now. Everything ends and everything begins."

"What did you find here beyond old tomes?" Morrigan asked.

"For over a decade, Acheron and Tenebrous had a project. A brilliant project." Maladi re-crossed her arms. "They developed a virus that targeted midi-chlorians. It killed the midi-chlorians and killed the host. It was a plague to eradicate the Jedi but they never used it. It had a single flaw." Maladi held up one red finger. "The Sith were just as vulnerable. They tried, again and again and again, to develop a virus that would only kill light side users. They could not. Midi-chlorians do not care what side of the Force they draw power from, and neither did the virus." She shrugged. "So they stopped. From what I've gleaned from Rakat'l, Tenebrous may have killed Acheron and abandoned the project. But the research stayed here, sealed up for three hundred years until *I* found it."

"You used it," Morrigan said grimly.

"Give me some credit, Corde-Calixte. I had to modify and improve it first. Using Darth Acheron's samples- cryo-

genically preserved all that time- I developed new strains. I needed to silence the midi-chlorians, not kill them.”

“But *why*?” Morrigan pressed.

“I took many attempts,” Maladi went on. “All those Sith and Jedi that came before... They did not survive their tests. But after two years, I perfected it. Not just a virus that deforms midi-chlorians so they can’t hear the Force, but one that incubated inside most hosts for upward of a week, giving them plenty of time to spread the disease to others unaware.”

“So you spread it to the Sith and Jedi, and all those others.”

“Of, more than them. This must be *total*. I had Qorlis speak with his subordinates- speak with them, face-to-face so they’d become carriers- then send them across the galaxy on minor errands. At the same time as the Sith and Jedi were getting my gift coughed into their faces, a hundred Force-blind carriers were spreading the virus across a hundred populated worlds all over the galaxy. Don’t you *see*, Corde-Calixte? By the time the Sith and Jedi knew what was happening, it was already too late to stop the spread.”

Morrigan tried to let it all sink in. Maladi might have gone mad, for reasons she still didn’t understand, but she was also a genius. She’d perfected Darth Acheron’s virus into a weapon the long-dead Sith Lord would never have imagined, then deployed it before anyone realized it existed.

There was one thing Morrigan had to know, even if it meant pressing Maladi too far. “Why me?” she asked. “Why did you expect *me* to come?”

“Because Qorlis was your bait, Calixte-Corde,” Maladi said. “Any vermin could have done the middle-man work he did. But you knew about Qorlis. I knew you watched him closely, back when you were just Calixte and I just a Sith Lord. You knew he was my favorite agent, and I knew you’d look for him when the empress tasked you to find me.”

“And how did you know the empress would do that?”

“Because the empress is no fool. She uses the best tools available and you, Corde-Calixte, are as fine a tool as a vermin could be.”

Morrigan tried to take that as a compliment. Maladi’s half-mad guesswork was disturbingly insightful, and she was

afraid what else she might have discerned. “Why *me*? Why did you want to draw me here?”

“Because,” said Maladi, “My experiment is not quite complete. There’s something I need to perfect. Where is your son, Cade Skywalker?”

Fear became realization. Something collapsed inside her but she said, “Cade is dead.”

“No. I *know* Cade Skywalker. He’s been in my head. In a way all this is *his* doing. So I know Cade is not dead. I have you. Soon I will have him. You will call him here for me.”

Morrigan took a deep breath. “If you think that, you’d better kill me right now. I can’t get you Cade because Cade is *dead*.”

“No!” Maladi shouted. Then, as if ashamed of her outburst, she moderated her tone. “Cade is not dead. Before I... before I succumbed to my own virus, I felt him. In the Force. In my head.” She tapped four fingers on her skull. “Cade is alive. And if there’s one person the galaxy he’d let in on that secret, it is you, Morrigan Corde. And you’d certainly have a way to contact him. Because we are alike, you and I. We love knowledge, and we love the power to use it.”

Morrigan swallowed. “Why is Cade so important to you?”

“Because he is Skywalker. Skywalkers are special in ways you can’t possibly understand.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but aren’t the Fels Skywalkers too?”

“Ah, yes, but will the empress come to me, let me take blood samples, peer into her midi-chlorians and find out why they’re immune to my virus? No, she would not.”

“And Cade will?” Morrigan asked. As soon as it came out she realized her slip. Maladi’s correct prediction that her disease would not effect Skywalkers had stunned her into making a mistake.

The Devaronian grinned. “You’re going to call him to me, Morrigan Corde. I know you will. I’ll have a comm system brought down here in minutes, and then you’ll do exactly as I ask.”

“No.”

“Yes, you will. For two reasons.” Maladi ticked up twin fingers. “One: You are dying. The concoction I injected did

not just reverse your paralysis. It was also a poison. You should start feeling the effects within half a standard hour. Nausea and vomiting will come first, then hallucinations. Then your body will melt from the inside, until blood pours from your mouth and spills from eyes, and only then will you die in utter agony.”

Morrigan’s free hand clutched her neck. Blood still pumped, carrying Maladi’s pathogen. Terror seized her. She’d risked her life countless times, but she’d never wanted to die. It was her deepest fear; even when she’d told Maladi to kill her a minute ago it had been an instinctive bluff.

Maladi smiled. “Naturally, I have a counteragent that will delay those symptoms for another twelve hours. And twelve hours after that, with another dose. I’ve yet to develop a way to neutralize the poison entirely, since I’ve never had the need to.”

Morrigan tried to open her mouth and get out one more glib reply. All she managed was a sob. In all her life she’d never been this beaten.

“Second,” said Maladi, “You will call Cade here because he is immune to the virus. You know that, don’t you? Yes, I thought he would be. You’re going to call him here and I am going to test him and analyze him and see what exactly makes him different. Maybe I’ll discover a way to render his midi-chlorians inert also. Maybe, somehow, he’ll turn the tables, escape with my knowledge, take it to the empress and the Jedi and they’ll find a way to restore the Force to themselves. Maybe. Your son is clever and determined. Anything may be possible. But first you need to bring Cade here.”

Morrigan moved her free hand to clasp her other arm. She squeezed tight to keep herself from trembling. She could find no appeal, no argument, no final ploy that would grant her victory. After all these years of scheming and counter-scheming against each other, Maladi had beaten her in the end.

“I’ll have Rakat’l bring the comm system down,” she told Morrigan gently. “Then you can talk to your son.”

## Chapter Twenty-Four

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It was midnight in Galactic City. Marasiah shifted restless in bed and turned on her side to watch light through the window. Distant spires ringing the government district glowed from within and headlights from airspeeders traced pulsing pathways through the dark. Everything was bright and moving and she could feel the cumulative energy of the trillion lives that wreathed the planet. Coruscant was the same as it had always been. That seemed cruel to her, almost mocking.

She felt Antares move beside her and rolled to face him. Her husband was on his back, staring at the dim ceiling with clumps of blanket gathered in his fists. Through the Force he emanated anger and confusion blurred by weariness. It was what he'd projected continuously since losing his ability to sense the Force, but the feeling had grown stronger since Ganner Krieg had attempted to take his own life.

Ganner was back in the medical ward under observation. Most of the other Jedi and Imperial Knights there had been released. That, combined with Marasiah's public display of Force powers when saving Ganner, had quieted some of the more accurate rumors about what had been going on, but it hadn't stopped them completely, and she knew that with time they'd grow loud again.

She knew that, if this great deafness to the Force drew on, she'd have to make an announcement in conjunction with K'Kruhk and Admiral Stazi. Though she'd had days to consider, she didn't know what she would say, or what she could do with her Imperial Knights when they were no

longer knights. Like a poor leader, she put off the hard choices, hoping a miracle might save her. The report from Ord Mantell had come in earlier this evening, saying that the Mandalorians who'd been working for Maladi had escaped capture. Possibly they'd been tipped off. Several Imperials had been killed and a Jedi grievously injured, and the hope of solving this puzzle had only gotten farther away.

She and her husband lay in bed for a while longer, sleepless, unhappy and uncertain. Eventually Antares rose without a word and walked over to the window. He stood in front of it, hands clasped tight behind his back, and watched artificial lights move through the night. After a short while Marasiah joined him. She slipped one arm around his and rested her head on his shoulder. She felt him exhale and gather his thoughts before he spoke.

"We can't continue as we are," Antares whispered. She sensed his *we* meant the Imperial Knights, the order they'd both pledged themselves to at a young age and whose values that'd always tried to fulfill. "The Jedi... They can make their own decisions, but our Knights..."

"No one would ever question your loyalty," she told him.

"Only our abilities. Our usefulness. We can still be your royal guard. Your agents. We'd do anything to serve you. All of us."

She knew Antares would. All his life he'd wanted to serve the Empire, to prove himself a worthy vessel for the values it embodied. He'd faced many trials, inside and out, none greater than when his beloved emperor had betrayed those very values. When forced to choose between the two Antares had chosen virtuous aspiration over a flawed man and brought his lightsaber against Roan Fel. If Antares could manage that ultimate test, he could survive this.

Yet despite what she'd told him, she wasn't sure every Imperial Knight would hold the same loyalty. Since the declaration of the triumvirate, the Knights had been flooded with eager untrained Force-users, even siphoning away potential Jedi adepts. All those young, promising students had found their promise cut short, and Marasiah expected many of them to leave Coruscant and try to return to their previous lives.



More worrying were men like Ganner, who'd constructed their entire lives around loyalty to the Force's will. They were rudderless now, and some might leave the Knights in search of a new conviction. Some might find the Force's silence too oppressive and take their own lives. In dark moments, she felt surprised that Ganner had been the only one so far to try.

She knew attempts to comfort Antares would prove hollow. Instead she simply stood with him, head trustingly on his shoulder, and hoped her presence brought small relief. They watched as Galactic City's traffic continued to flow, well past midnight now, and while it seemed they watched for hours no predawn light crept into the sky.

When the communications relay built into her bedstand buzzed, both of them jerked apart. At this hour Marasiah was only bothered for the most urgent calls, and her pulse was racing as she sat on the bedside and turned the comm on. "This is the empress. Speak."

"We have a high-priority message directed for you, Majesty." Astraal Vao replied, audio-only.

"From whom?"

There was a two-second pause. Then Astraal said, as if she couldn't believe it herself. "Cade Skywalker."

"That's impossible," Antares said.

"Majesty, I think you should talk to him yourself."

"Give us one minute, Astraal."

Marasiah turned off the comm and rose from the bed. Antares followed her as stalked toward the exit, grabbing a light violet shawl on the way and throwing it over her nightgown. She made her way from the bedroom across her darkened living space to where she kept her personal communications suite.

"Skywalker is dead," Antares told her. "It has to be a trick."

"By whom? The Sith?"

"If Skywalker's alive, he's been missing in action for two years. There's no telling what he's gotten up to in that time."

"Then we'll just have to listen to what he says." Marasiah turned the comm system on. Astraal's half-scale holo-image flickered to life in front of her. She took a breath, patted

down the violet shawl so she looked halfway regal, and said, "Put him on, Astraal."

Astraal's image nodded, then disappeared. A second later a familiar visage appeared on the holo. Messy blond hair framed his face, light stubble fuzzed his chin, and his bare arms were laced by scars and tattoos. Mostly, though, it was his eyes that marked him as Skywalker. They had an intensity that was impossible to mistake, even seen through a static-marred holo.

"Cade Skywalker," Marasiah said evenly. "This is a surprise."

"You want a surprise, wait 'till you hear what I've got to say. Sorry, *we*'ve got to say. Let me turn this into a group call."

Before Marasiah could ask what he meant, Skywalker leaned halfway out of the holo's viewing range. A moment later a second person's image appeared beside his. It was Gunner Yage.

"Are you patched in?" Skywalker asked.

"I've got it, thanks," said Yage.

Marasiah looked between the two half-siblings. If they were working together- itself an unlikely event, according to reports of their past encounter- it had to involve their mother and the Sith she was chasing. That Morrigan Corde was absent from this conversation was glaringly obvious.

She knew from experience that conversations with Skywalker were like trying to tame a rancor, so he focused her attention on his sister.

"Agent Yage, explain. How is Skywalker involved in your mission and where is Agent Corde?"

"I'll handle that," Skywalker butted in. "Corde's on Te Hasa, in the Gree Enclave. Darth Maladi's holding her hostage. We're on the way now, but we're coming from the Calia Sector, so it'll take us time to get there."

That was a lot to take in. "Agent Yage, is this true?"

"Yes. After we captured Niall Qorlis at Ord Vaxal, Agent Corde... stunned me and dropped me in an escape pod, then went off on her own. She called Skywalker and told him to retrieve me."

Marasiah allowed herself to feel humbled; despite having the best surveillance and fact-finding networks in the galaxy at her disposal, she'd had no idea that Skywalker was alive, nor that Corde was in contact with her son. "How do you know Maladi has Agent Corde?"

"Because they called me," Skywalker said grimly. "She said Maladi wants *me*. Didn't specify why, though I've got a guess. You gone Force-blind like the rest of 'em, Empress?"

She swallowed. "No."

"Well, neither have I."

Skywalker let that sit there. She knew the two of them were distant relatives, descendants of Anakin Skywalker who'd served Palpatine as Darth Vader before destroying him. Her father had told her that Anakin had supposedly been conceived by the Force itself and born by no mortal father, and while his tone had been marked by skepticism, he'd not denied it outright.

"Maladi wants me," Skywalker said gruffly. "So I guess I've got to go to her."

"Gree space is supposed to be inviolable," Antares said from Marasiah's shoulder. "Their worlds have automated defenses that shoot down any foreign vessel."

"I'm guessing Maladi's going to give me clearance for that," Skywalker shrugged. "Not sure how that helps you, though."

Marasiah didn't either, but she knew one thing. With the source of this affliction finally found she couldn't wait on Coruscant and do nothing. She'd take a task force to Gree space and, as empress and ruler of the Galactic Federation triumvirate, demand access to Te Hasa. Such a bold action would force down the wall of secrecy she'd erected around the crippled Jedi and Imperial Knights. It could even start a war if the Gree refused.

Still, it had to be done. She closed her eyes and saw Ganner Krieg in memory, collapsed on the ground, curled up and trembling in existential agony. She couldn't allow his suffering, and that of all the other deafened knights, to continue.

"Explain your situation," Marasiah said. "What ships are you on and how many people are you taking to Te Hasa?"

Yage got in before her half-brother could speak. "Skywalker is aboard his *Mynock*. I'm aboard a captured *Nemesis*-class patrol ship."

"Captured from whom?"

"Sith," Skywalker grinned. "I should say, former Sith, since they're as Force-blind as the Jedi right now."

It was another stunner. All this while she'd expected the virus was a sophisticated plot by Maladi and her fellow Sith to rob their enemies of the Force, thus paving the way for their ascension. She'd actually hoped it was the case, because it would mean the Sith had a working antidote.

"Are you saying Maladi did all this on her own?" Antares sounded as perplexed as her. "Why in space would she do that?"

"I don't know," said Skywalker. "I'll have to ask her when I see her. But Gunner's got one Sith captive on her ship, an apprentice. I've got the master on *Mynock*." He grinned again. "I bet you remember Darth Talon."

Her mind flashed all the way to Vendaxa and the agile, nubile scarlet-and-black Twi'lek who'd attacked her, Antares, and Skywalker all at once. "I do. Are you *sure* she no longer has the Force?"

"She's not faking. Trust me." He tapped below one eye. "Turns out she's got pretty blues without that gold Sith-stain on 'em. Who'd have thought?"

If the Sith were deaf to the Force too, then perhaps there *was* no counteragent. Perhaps the Jedi and the Imperial Knights were condemned to extinction, all except for her and Cade Skywalker. The thought filled her with quaking dread, but she reminded herself that even if no antigen existed, it could still be created.

"Darth Maladi needs to be captured alive," Marasiah said.

Skywalker didn't argue. "Any ideas about how to make it happen?"

"What else can you tell me about Te Hasa?"

"Not much. Mom said it was some really old Sith lab Maladi resurrected. I don't even know *where* on the planet it is. She said Maladi'll light a beacon when I show up."

Marasiah expected as much; Maladi was too canny to allow her opponents to draw concrete plans against her. It

was time to quit talking and start acting. "Do not go to Te Hasa right away. I'll be taking a fleet to Gree space. We will rendezvous outside the Enclave and devise a plan of action *together*. Is that understood?"

Yage immediately saluted. "Yes, Empress."

Skywalker, to her relief, didn't object. "Fine. You've got our comm freq. Hail us with coordinates and your ETA when you're in hyperspace."

"We will." Before turning off the comm she hesitated a moment on what to say. Then it came to her. "May the Force be with you."

Skywalker snorted, smiled, and said, "You too. See you in Gree space."

Marasiah killed the connection. Skywalker and Yage disappeared from the room, leaving her with Antares. She looked out the living room window and saw the Coruscant skyline, still luminous, now roofed by a violet pre-dawn glow.

"Antares," she said, "Hail my uncle, Admiral Stazi, Admiral Yage, and Master K'Kruhk while I get dressed. Tell them to meet us in my office in thirty minutes. Don't explain, just say it's urgent. There's a lot to talk about before we go."

The Second Wheel's owner was irate that a firefight had broken out on his station between Mandalorians and Imperial agents. The red-faced and foaming Rybet had berated Azlyn and Colonel Sovis and given them an hour to remove their ships from the facility. He'd also declared their actions a violation of the Second Wheel's neutrality and stated his intention to take his complaint directly to the triumvirate.

But he wasn't totally unreasonable. He had not, thankfully, denied medical help to Shado Vao.

The Wheel's doctors were more competent than Azlyn expected. They carefully lifted Shado's unconscious form onto a stretcher and carried him away, and once she'd finally extricated herself from the station owner's complaints, she tracked them down to the station's main surgical center. To her relief Shado was still alive. Medical droids had performed an emergency operation the second he was brought in, removing blast-damaged tissue on his abdomen

and binding broken organs with micro-sutures. They hadn't been able to do anything with his arm except amputate it at the elbow, but at least they'd saved Shado's life. He was still unconscious when they put him in the bacta tank. The medical chief, a polite Elomin, told Azlyn that he'd have to remain in the tank for days to make a full recovery.

That jarred with the station owner's ultimatum that they leave the Wheel in an hour. The Rybet, slightly calmer now, allowed them to keep a handful of personnel aboard to watch over Shado until he could leave the station. The bulk of the Imperial platoon they'd brought from Bilbringi still had to go.

As soon as he said it, Azlyn determined to stay at the Wheel as long as Shado was here. Her old friend would need a familiar face when he came out of the bacta tank. It wouldn't be enough to heal his physical or mental injuries, but it was the least she could do.

"Are you going back to Coruscant now?" Azlyn asked Anj as the two women returned to *Scarlet Star*. Azlyn had travelled light and it wouldn't take long to retrieve her and Shado's things.

"Maybe," Anj sighed. The supply of good cheer that had sustained her on this mission seemed to have finally run out. "I'm going to try and find Vevec, wherever he went, then have a talk with Hondo Karr. There still might be a way to track Thorum Rhal."

"They know we're after them. That means they'll go to ground."

"I know, but there still might be a way."

The two women walked into *Scarlet Star*'s main hold. Though he'd never been loud or intrusive, the ship seemed hollowed without him. Grimly, Azlyn went to her cabin and began packing her belongings while Anj went into Shado's and started gathering his. One pack for clothes and equipment, another for the spare armor plates. A small case with backup parts for her respirator. Her lightsaber. It felt heavy and strange in her hand, and for a moment she stood there looking at it, wondering if there was a reason to keep this at all. For the last few years she'd felt torn between her present as an Imperial Knight and her past as a Jedi. Now the dilemma was moot, all her inner turmoil wasted. It felt like

the universe had played a sick joke and she never wanted to see this lightsaber again. It was a mocking reminder of what should have been.

Anj knocked on the cabin door, interrupting her gathering despair. The woman poked her head through the frame and said, "Azlyn, we're getting a hail, priority channel."

She nodded, stuffed the lightsaber into her equipment bag, and followed Anj through the hold to *Scarlet Star's* cockpit. Anj typed her decryption key into the comm console and dropped into the pilot's chair. Azlyn leaned over its back as a holo-image of Antares Draco appeared before them.

That surprised Azlyn; he'd not been involved with the mission thus far. She asked, "What can we do for you, Master Draco?"

"I've just spoken with Colonel Slovm," he said. "He'll be taking his ship back to Bilbringi. You, however, are ordered to rendezvous with the empress in the Outer Rim, near Gree space. The exact coordinates are attached to this message."

"Gree space?" Anj frowned. "What's out there? Besides Gree, I mean."

"Darth Maladi is on the planet Te Hasa," Draco said simply. "We're going to extract her."

"Maladi? How did you find her?"

"You'll understand if I don't speak on it here, but we've had other agents looking for her also."

Of course they would, Azlyn thought grimly. The empress would never leave the fate of the galaxy in the hands of one snubfighter pilot and a couple knights who couldn't even use the Force. It was good news, but her thoughts fell back to Shado. "Master Draco, Knight Vao is still on the Wheel. He's been badly wounded and Colonel Slovin was going to leave behind a few troops to watch over him."

"I know. The colonel told me."

"I was going to stay too."

Draco shook his head. "No. The empress has personally requested your presence. And Admiral Stazi has requested that you, Commander Dahl, also be present as his observer."

"I'm going to check those orders," Anj said.

"Feel free to, but the empress will expect your prompt arrival at the rendezvous point."

“Well, I won’t disappoint the empress,” Anj said dryly.

Azlyn swallowed. “Master Draco, with your permission, I would very, very much like to stay with Knight Vao.”

“Permission denied. The empress specifically requested you.”

This was what she’d never liked about the Imperial Knights. Obedience to the empress- or emperor- trumped everything, all the time, and you were always expected to comply like a good soldier. She wanted to tell him that no, she’d not abandon one of the few friends she had left, but she stopped herself. She’d already done that once lately. Softly she said, “Understood, Master Draco. Will Master Krieg also be coming to Gree space.”

Something washed over Draco’s face she wasn’t used to seeing. He reassembled his stern mask and said, “Master Krieg will remain on Coruscant.”

There was something else there. She had no idea what, and she hated this too, but once again she’d have to comply. “I understand. We’ll meet you at Gree space.”

“Good. The empress looks forward to your arrival.”

The holo shut off. Anj sighed and looked up to Azlyn. “Looks like somebody is less of a screw-up than us. Any idea who found Maladi?”

“No,” she muttered. It hadn’t even occurred to her to guess.

“Well, I’m not leaving until I confirm orders with Stazi. You have time to leave Shado a quick goodbye, if you want.”

He wouldn’t be awake to receive it, she knew, but that wasn’t really the point. She could still do something; she could still leave a message, to soothe his wounded mind and her own conscience. It was a small gesture, but small gestures were all they were capable of now. Maybe that was all they’d ever have.

There was no fanfare as the empress’ personal shuttle departed from the main palace landing platform, sailed up through the clouds, breached atmosphere and finally docked inside the star destroyer *Jagged Fel*. Nonetheless, the denizens of the galaxy would take note and one day soon Marasiah would have to give them explanation for all that



had been happening. For the vast majority of them, what she'd explain would be incomprehensible. Ever for her, these was so much that didn't make sense. She prayed she'd be able to tell them this epidemic of Force-blindness was reversible. If not, she would have to couch this crisis in a way that muted its severity for the sake of galactic cohesion. It would be a challenge, but her father had taught her at a young age to never show weakness. A monarch had to be seen as ruling from strength at all times.

The *Jagged Fel* was a royal symbol in itself. The old white-hulled vessel had been passed through three successive generations of Fel monarchs and had often acted as their flagship during difficult battles. She had no idea whether the Gree paid enough attention to outside affairs to understand the ship's importance, but just being aboard filled Marasiah with badly-needed confidence.

Once her shuttle docked, the *Jagged Fel* began breaking orbit and maneuvering for the first jump of their long journey to the Outer Rim. Marasiah made her way to the bridge along with an entourage that included Antares and Treis Sinde, both in their scarlet armor and ceremonial capes, as well as Admiral Rulf Yage, who'd be commanding the military aspect of the mission, if it came to fighting. Her uncle Hogrum had stayed behind on Coruscant to manage things in her absence, and to keep Gar Stazi in check if necessary.

When the empress reached the command deck she saw that the *Jagged Fel* had fully moved away from the planet. Nothing but stars spread across the viewports and the crew was preparing to jump. Through the Force she could sense their collective thoughts. The men and women knew where they were going but not why, and their minds were full of questions stirred by rumor. Still, they felt honored to have their empress aboard and were committed to doing their duty as always. Sensing that in her crew gave Marasiah more assurance. The stability of the galaxy rested not just on Force-users, but in normal beings doing their humble, essential duties. She forgot that too often.

When Marasiah looked to the forward viewport she spotted the Jedi Order's contribution to this expedition. K'Kruhk and Lowbacca were hard to miss. Their tall, long-furred bodies

were draped in brown robes and their shaggy heads were turned to face the starfield. She watched their stolid backs as stars blurred and became the light-swirl of hyperspace.

Signaling Antares and Yage to stay behind, Marasiah walked alone down the bridge's central aisle and sidled next to K'Kruhk. "We are underway," she said simply. "Thank you for coming aboard."

"This is not an event we can miss," said K'Kruhk. Beside him, Lowbacca roared soft agreement.

She regarded the two Jedi with a sideways glance. Both were far older than any human could grow to be and had seen the galaxy pass through wars and trials Marasiah could only imagine. While K'Kruhk showed his two hundred years in his hunched posture and graying fur, the Wookiee was still robust at less than a century and a half old. If it came to fighting on Te Hasa, he'd be more useful than any Force-blind human.

"Empress," K'Kruhk said, "I must ask. How far are you willing to go to secure Darth Maladi?"

"Is there a place I should stop?"

"The Gree will not take kindly to our intrusion."

"The Gree will think carefully when they see the fleet we're bringing with us. I've detached an entire battle group from Bastion that will be ready, if we need it."

"If you mean to fight your way to the Gree, many beings will die on both sides, and if anything it will lessen our chances of taking Maladi alive."

"I know. I'm not hoping for a fight, Master Jedi, but I'm prepared for one."

"I see... You are your father's daughter, after all."

Marasiah flinched. She had to remind herself that K'Kruhk didn't know about Roan Fel's last moments, his shameful end. "If we can't force Maladi to make a cure for this disease, you may spend the rest of your life detached from the Force. After all you've been through, all the decades of strife, can you just give it up?"

Lowbacca responded with a mournful howl. K'Kruhk said, "Quite right. We do not want to, but we may have to."

"I'll do whatever it takes to restore the Force to us all," she told them. "I promise."

“Even if it costs the lives of thousands of non-Force users? Are they to be sacrificed so *we* may regain our powers?”

Marasiah was disappointed. She knew Jedi were given to weak-wristed moral dithering but she'd thought these two would understand the stakes. “The Jedi and Imperial Knights are essential to preserving peace and just throughout the galaxy. This is why our orders exist. What will happen to the galaxy if they go extinct? How many will die then? Masters Jedi, I will do everything I can to cure this disease. I'll make hard sacrifices, if I have to. The galaxy *needs* our kind.”

“I hope you're right. And I won't argue otherwise... not here. Not now.”

Lowbacca moaned once more. Marasiah didn't understand but K'Kruhk nodded agreement. “You're right, of course. Hopefully, we won't have to find out.”

The conversation disturbed her. It led her mind down avenues it could not afford to go, not if she was to continue ruling from strength. She politely excused herself and went back across the bridge to Antares and Sinde, where she could feel a little more assured.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

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The newcomers from *Free Agent* got a stony welcome when they arrived at the Mandalorian encampment. They were quickly escorted inside the largest of the camp's domed structures and made to sit together in one corner, where a dozen Mandalorians could watch them through faceless visors helmets. They weren't supposed to be prisoners. That's what Ania had told them and Jao wanted to believe her, but it was hard. She didn't seem like she believed it either.

Even harder to believe was that the gray-haired woman who didn't wear a helmet was Ania's mother. They didn't even look similar, not to Jao's eyes. This older woman, Marin, was taller than Ania, with sharper features only partly softened by age. More, they carried themselves differently. The Ania he'd known for two years was impulsive and sometimes erratic, oftentimes brave but also prone to running from this she didn't want to handle. Those things were less often fights, more often past actions and future responsibilities. This Marin woman looked weighed down by both, but she seemed to have accepted them.

Marin didn't seem much interested in talking to her daughter's companions. As Jao, Ania, Kyra, and Sauk huddled in their corner she was in the opposite side of the chamber, sitting at the comm station with several other Mandos and apparently having some long-distance conversation. That had given Ania time to explain the situation, as she understood it, and for them to tell her everything that had happened since her kidnapping.

Explanations did little to assure. A feeling of oppressive helplessness had been weighing on Jao since he'd lost the Force, and it was worse now than ever. All his life he'd relied on the Force's guidance. Though it never spoke aloud, it still spoke to him and he'd followed its wisdom, forsaking his vows as an Imperial Knight to traipse around the galaxy with Ania. Now he felt derelict and directionless, subject to the whims of a crueler master.

"Now that they've gone to all this trouble to get you here, what do they plan to *do* with you?" Kyra asked in a low voice. They'd been talking in whispers this whole time, though for all they knew those Mandalorian helmets picked up every word.

"I don't know." Ania had hunched forward into herself, as though cold. "I'm not sure if there *is* a plan."

"Then why go to all this trouble to get you here?"

"Because I'm her daughter." Ania's eyes drifted to the woman across the room. "She thought I was dead this time."

"Besides," Jao attempted humor, "I doubt you'd have come if they just *asked*."

Very seriously, Ania nodded. "I wouldn't have. And I wish..." She trailed off before saying whether she'd wanted this reunion at all. She probably didn't even know. Instead she asked Jao and Kyra, "What about you? How in the hells did you two just *lose* the Force? I didn't know it was possible."

"It shouldn't be," Jao said. "The Force is... it's *everything*, Ania. It's life itself. It can't just go away."

"But it did."

"Believe me, this is more frustrating for me than I explain." He let tired anger seep into his voice. "I really have no idea."

"You haven't heard anything on the news-nets about other Jedi losing the Force?"

"We haven't really checked lately," Sauk said. "We were too busy chasing you. The Mandos haven't said anything?"

"No. I think they're more concerned about me too." She sighed. "You know, I never wanted to be popular."

"Well, it's not just you." Jao jabbed a finger at the group by the comm console. "Something else is going down. Do you have any idea what?"

“No. They’re trying to bring down the ruling Mandalore. Don’t ask me how.”

“I think we should-” Sauk was interrupted by the buzz of the comlink in his pocket. He immediately stuffed his hand inside and pulled it out, small cylinder hidden in its folded webs. Jao looked around anxiously; most of the Mandos seemed more interested in the conversation on the other side of the room and none seemed to have noticed Sauk.

“Who’s calling us? And how?” asked Jao.

“I set *Free Agent*’s computer to relay all calls here,” the Mon Cal said. He leaned forward, folded webbed hands together, then held them close to his mouth so he could keep the comlink hidden while speaking to it. “This is Sauk. Who is it?”

“It is excellent to hear from you, my friend,” AG-37 said. His voice was tinny and very faint. They all leaned close to hear. “What is your situation?”

“We’re on Surcaris,” Sauk whispered into his hands. “We’re with Ania’s mother. And some Mandalorians. It’s a really long story. Where are *you*, A-gee? We tried to call you on Skywalker’s ship and didn’t get an answer.”

“We were occupied at the time. I am still aboard *Mynock* and heading toward Gree space.”

“Gree space? What’s out there?”

“Apparently, the source of much trouble. It seems Jedi and Imperial Knights have been losing contact with the Force.”

Jao wanted to wrench the comm from Sauk’s hands. Instead he leaned in closer and asked, “How many, A-gee?”

“All of them, Jao.”

AG-37’s words, coolly delivered, were like a hammer-blow. That he and Kyra had lost the ability to use the Force was terrible; that the others had too was staggering. Though he’d strayed from the vow of the Imperial Knights he still respected the organization and cared about the people in it. Without the Force, what were they? The very order could go extinct, its former Knights scattered aimlessly across the stars as they groped for new purpose.

As his mind struggled to grasp this revelation, Kyra asked, “A-gee, how did this happen? Do we know?”

“Apparently a virus manufactured by a Sith lord currently hiding in the Gree Enclave. Skywalker is on his way there with several captured Sith- themselves also deprived of the Force- and will rendezvous with Empress Fel outside Gree space.” After a short pause, he added, “As you can see, I’ve been quite busy.”

“We’ll come to you,” Jao said. There was no place else in the galaxy he wanted to be, nothing else he wanted to do. Ania seemed to pale at the thought of reuniting with both her distant cousins, but Jao didn’t care. He needed to get to the bottom of this. He needed the Force back. Nothing else mattered.

“We have to, ah, extricate ourselves first,” Sauk said. “A-gee, we’ll update you if, um, *when* we get off Surcaris. What’s your ETA to Gree space?”

“Approximately forty-one standard hours.”

They might have time to catch up, but only if they got moving now. Jao tried to calculate distance and travel time when a voice said behind him, “Hey, who are you calling? Put that comm down!”

“Sorry, A-gee, got to run,” Sauk said.

He folded his flippered hand around the comm and stuffed it back into his pocket, but the silver-armored Mandalorian who loomed over them didn’t look assuaged.

“Who were you calling?” The Mando put one hand on the butt of his holstered blaster.

“Actually, they called us. We couldn’t just leave ‘em hanging.” Ania spread her hands. “I need to talk to my mother now.”

Silver-armor stared down at her and didn’t move.

Ania sighed. “Aren’t you my cousin or whatever? Aren’t I family? I need to talk to my mother. I’m not a prisoner here. Right?”

“You’re not,” the Mando said begrudgingly.

“Then I’m talking to her.” Ania stood up and nodded at the comm console on the other side of the chamber. “They done with their conversation?”

The Mando nodded.

“Good. I’ll go over now.”

Reluctantly, the Mando stepped aside to let her pass. Ania took two steps toward her mother when Jao jumped forward and grabbed her by the arm.

“What are you doing?” he bent close and whispered.

“I’m trying to get us out of here.”

“Us?”

“Yes.” Seen this close, her eyes had a faint wet sheen. “That woman over there, these Mandos... They’re not my family.”

“But she is your mother. Your real mother.”

“Yeah.” Ania’s voice went hoarse; her eyes dipped to the floor. “But I don’t *like* her, Jao. I don’t like any of this. And besides, something big’s going down, really big if Skywalker and the empress are involved. I can see what losing the Force has done to you, and to Kyra. I may not understand it, but the Force is important to you both.” She swallowed; eyes flicked back up to his. “I get that now. And I’m sorry I made a big deal about it back on Esseles. That was selfish.”

He could barely remember their argument. He lowered his hand and gave hers a squeeze. “Thank you. Really.”

“Thank me once we’re out of here.” She squeezed back, then withdrew. “This isn’t going to be an easy conversation.”

Nothing about this was easy, not for Jao and especially not for Ania. He knew she was caught between two responsibilities she’d instinctively try to flee from. On one side, a family legacy she didn’t want. On the other, a galaxy-threatening problem she’d normally try to avoid. That she’d picked the latter over the former, without hesitation, touched him and gave badly-needed solace.

There was no solace for Ania, though. She took a deep breath, then walked across the room to her mother.

They stepped outside for privacy. Morning glow spilled across the clearing but the air was still cool. It prickled Ania’s skin and she hugged her arms against herself as they walked slow circles around the central *karyai*.

“My friends don’t have anything to do with this,” Ania told Marin. “You need to let them go. They have someplace they need to be. I’m sorry if this messes up your secret base or whatever... But they have to go.”



Marin seemed to have expected that. "And you?"

Ania braced herself; she had no idea how this hard, enigmatic woman might react. "I need to go with them."

"Need?"

"Yes." Ania waited for argument; it didn't come, but that didn't mean she'd gotten through to her mother. "I have to ask... Can you still use the Force? You said your father was a Jedi."

"A Jedi Master," Marin corrected.

"But the Force... can you use it?"

Marin stopped and looked at the clearing's edge. Ania waited for a reply, then noticed that one particular tree had begun to tremble. It took alone; there was no wind. As Ania watched, branches began to snap off as though pulled by invisible hands. They clattered to the earth and began to pile around the tree's wide trunk.

And then it stopped. Ania looked back to her mother; Marin's expression was unchanged. Thoughtfully the older woman said, "I gave up the Force for a long, long time. I knew its powers, good and bad, and how it could make you lose control of yourself. So when I quit the Jedi I resolved not to use it at all. I was stubborn about it. I held the Force back for years and years. Decades. Do you know what made me go back to it?"

Ania shook her head.

"Torn Station," Marin said, instantly evoking memories of that awful day. "When I saw *Fast Start* get ripped apart I opened myself to the Force. It came back easier than I thought it would. I tried to search the wreckage and feel for you or your father..." She lowered her head as if ashamed. "I couldn't. I didn't even know what you two would feel like in the Force. I'd been pushing it away that much. And for all these years I've thought if I *had* let myself use the Force, even a little, things would have gone differently at Torn Station. And now I know they would have."

Ania let that sink in. Her mother seemed halfway buried by different layers of regret, past events she wished she could undo but couldn't. It was everything Ania was deadly afraid of becoming, and even as part of her felt sympathy for this woman, she revolted even harder. What lay ahead in Gree

space with Skywalker and the empress would be another kind of trial, but even that felt preferable to staying with her mother.

It was a cruel thing, and she couldn't bring herself to say it. Instead she tried to make Marin understand in another way.

"I don't know how much longer you'll be able to keep using the Force," she said.

Marin looked at her, confused. "What do you mean?"

"They're all losing contact with it. The Jedi and Imperial Knights. Apparently the Sith, too. My friend Jao says it's gone silent for him. I don't know what that means, not really... but I bet you do."

Marin's eyes went distant. Ania wondered if she hadn't made a mistake in revealing that Jao no longer had his special powers; it would make it that much easier for the Mandos to keep him here. But her mother had larger concerns.

"How?" she asked hoarsely. "How are they *all* losing the Force?"

"I don't know. I've heard it's some disease. Some manufactured virus."

"Made by whom?"

"I don't know. I really don't. I just found out minutes ago."

"But you and your friends are going to do something to help?"

Marin sounded like she couldn't believe it. Ania didn't quite believe it either. "Yeah. Well, we'll try."

The old woman reached out and cupped her daughter's face with one hand. This time, Ania didn't flinch. Morning light caught the tears in Marin's eyes but she said, "You should get going, then."

Ania reached up and touched her mother's hand. It was the first time she'd done that. "Thank you."

Marin lowered her hand from Ania's face. "I think some things make more sense now."

"What do you mean?"

"My people were working with the triumvirate to track one of Auch's lieutenants. Thorum Rhal and his team had been caught kidnapping Jedi and Imperial Knights. It sounds like this had something to do with it."

Ania hadn't expected that. "Did you find the Rhal guy?"

"On Ord Mantell. He escaped. There was a firefight and Tes' brother was wounded." Marin's expression went hard. "It seems he was tipped off. The triumvirate's people are furious with us. They think there may be a leak in our organization... It's something I'm going to have to deal with."

The look in her eyes was lethal and Ania was reminded what a harsh woman her mother had become. That reminder didn't repulse her as it had before.

After all, Ania was a killer too.

"If you want... I can let you know how this works out."

Marin reached into her pocket, then placed a small datacard in Ania's palm. "This has my comm frequency. It will reach me anywhere."

"Okay." Ania folded her hand around it and withdrew from her mother's touch. She didn't know if she'd use it. She didn't know if she wanted to, but she'd keep it. Despite everything she couldn't just throw her mother away.

They said nothing else before walking back into the *karyai*. When they entered every head was turned toward them. Ania walked straight for her friends without looking back. Behind her Marin announced, "They're free to go. They have something important they need to take care of."

Though their faces were hidden behind masked helmets, Ania guessed the other Mandos weren't too happy about her announcement. Yet none of them complained; they seemed to trust her mother that far.

Jao, Sauk, and Kyra were rising from their seats with expressions of restrained disbelief. None of them had expected it to be that easy. Frankly, neither had Ania.

"So that's it then?" Kyra asked. "We're just... free to go?"

"That's right. We're all going." Ania stuffed her hand in her pocket but didn't release the datachip held tight by her fist. "Come on. We don't want to keep our friends waiting."

Once Surcaris was far behind them, it was over a day's journey to Gree space. They'd contacted AG-37 after liftoff, received coordinates for a rendezvous point, and plotted the

jumps that would get them there. Once the trip was underway, all they had to do was wait.

Kyra hated it. On the way to Surcaris she'd been tense and worried but Jao's training session had introduced her to wonder like she'd never known. It had shown her that she was more than what she'd thought she was and might accomplish things she'd never dares imagine. Yet just as that great window had opened it had slammed shut in her face. She was glad to have rescued Ania and glad she'd be reunited with C-3PO and the others soon, but none of that could calm her. She'd been presented with a gift, then had it snatched away. Even stuck under Rav's heel, the universe hadn't seemed this cruel.

Sauk handled the piloting of the ship, the preparing of food and all the other necessary tasks that would see them to their destination. The Mon Cal mechanic, who on first meeting had struck Kyra as dour, had become the most dependable one aboard *Free Agent*. Everyone else was lost in private worries and avoided the company of others.

At once point, deep in the ship's night-cycle, Kyra wandered into the ship's galley to reheat some of the bean paste she'd started eating hours before. It wasn't particularly good, and she wasn't particularly hungry, but she couldn't sleep and needed to do something to distract herself from unhappy questions. She wasn't the only one; five minutes after she started chewing the tasteless mush Ania showed up.

"You're up late." The older woman smiled, but Kyra saw it took effort.

Kyra swallowed her mouthful. "I never went to sleep."

"I kind of slept. For a little bit." Ania peeked into the refrigeration unit and took out a bottle of green blumfruit juice. She twisted off the cap, sat down at the table opposite Kyra, and drank.

Kyra chewed another mouthful. Ania drank a little more. Things had never felt this awkward between them. Kyra wanted to break things open somehow but couldn't see a way. Instead Ania leaned forward and said, "I should thank you for coming to get me. I already thanked you all as a group, but not you, personally. So thanks."

It had never occurred to Kyra to do otherwise. "Thanks."

“Jao and Sauk and I, we’ve been through a lot together. You and me, though, we barely know each other, so I appreciate it all the same.”

Kyra didn’t feel like she barely knew Ania. The older woman had opened up to her early, in a way she sensed Ania rarely opened up to anybody. She knew their backgrounds were the same, and that Ania saw a lot of herself in Kyra. Jao had taken interest of a different kind, benevolent in its own way. It was strange having people who cared about you. Kyra hadn’t known how badly she’d needed them.

She wasn’t comfortable putting all that into words yet, so she said, “What’s going to happen with your mother?”

Ania blinked. “What do you mean?”

“I mean... are you going back to her?”

“I hadn’t planned on it.”

The simplicity with which Ania said it surprised her. Then she remembered Ania’s reaction to C-3PO and AG-37’s revelations on Esseles. Ania had stalked out of the room as fast as she could, like she was fleeing new knowledge. What she’d done at Surcaris hadn’t been that different.

“You don’t plan on seeing your mother again? Ever?”

“Maybe. I don’t know.” Ania’s voice wavered. She took another drink and looked at the tabletop. “That woman on Surcaris was nothing like I remembered of my mother. Granted, it’s been ten years, and I didn’t even have a holo to keep her imagine alive. But the image of her in my heart... that doesn’t match the woman on Surcaris.”

“But it’s still her.”

“Maybe. She’d... done things, a long time ago. I think she’s trying to rectify those things, because she sees them as mistakes, but she didn’t *always* see them as mistakes. If you get what I’m saying.”

“Not really,” Kyra admitted.

Ania sighed. Her eyes darted up and held Kyra’s. There was a probing intensity about them, but Kyra didn’t look away. Eventually Ania said, “You heard me mention I’d been in a prison once, right?”

Kyra remembered Ania’s angry outburst to AG-37 back on Esseles. In everything that had followed she’d nearly forgotten that detail. “You said it was an Imperial camp?”

“Right. On Drash-So.” She paused again and looked down at her hands. “They sent me there because I’d killed a guy.”

“Oh,” Kyra said. She couldn’t think of anything else.

“After I lost my parents a drifted a lot, kind of like you. I ended up on Enarc for a while. I tried to make a living doing odd jobs and ending up working for this Imp official. He was some third-tier undersecretary for the local moff who made a nice side business peddling spice and taking kickbacks from local crime bosses. He was a total *sleemo* but he acted like he was lord of all he karking saw, and he was good at manipulating people and keeping them under his heel. Especially people who were young and kind of desperate.”

Kyra saw where this was going. Now things truly made sense. “Like Rav,” she said.

“Basically.” Ania seemed to sink deeper into herself. “He drew me in close. Used me to traffic his spice. He wanted to use me for other stuff, stuff I *really* didn’t want to do...”

She stopped. Kyra said, “I get it. You don’t have to explain.”

Ania laughed once, weakly. “You know, I’m not really the kind of person who plans things, like Jao keeps reminding me. We were in his office. He had his service pistol holstered at his hip, with the safety latch off. I saw that, and two seconds later he tried to put his hands on me. And I just... grabbed it and squeezed the trigger. His staff outside heard the shot and came charging in. I guess I’m lucky they didn’t blast me in the spot.” She laughed one more time. “I don’t think any of them liked the *sleemo* either.”

Kyra tried to decide what to say. Ania didn’t seem sorry for what she’d done, but she wasn’t proud either. It was something she went through most of her days trying to forget ever happened. And that, Kyra realized, had been the point of her revelation.

“You want to get beyond all that,” she said.

Ania nodded. “I don’t want my life to end up defined by one thing I did a long time ago. Right thing, wrong thing, it doesn’t matter. I don’t want to be trapped by the past.”

“And your mother is?”

“Yeah. She is. And I don’t think there’s anything I can do for her.”

Except leave, Kyra thought. She saw how it would help Ania, but not how it might help her mother. Ania might not see either, but she'd made her choice to leave Surcaris. Right choice, wrong choice, it didn't matter. Ania didn't like looking back.

Kyra quietly sealed the lid on her container of cooled bean paste. Ania took a long gulp of blumfruit juice and added, "You should be thinking about what *you* 'll do next. I don't know anything about this Force-stealing virus or whatever's going on, but you've got to look at your options."

"In case I never get the Force back?"

"Or if you do."

Kyra nodded. Ania pushed off from the table, stuck the half-drunk bottle of juice back inside the refrigerator, and held out a hand for Kyra's container. The younger woman handed it off, and once that was done they both left the galley and turned off the light behind them.

Before entering their cabins Ania said, "Just think about what you'll do either way. And remember, it's your choice. Not Jao's and not mine."

"I know."

Ania's smile was faint. "It's good somebody does. Good night."

"Good night," Kyra echoed, and watched Ania disappear into her room.

She walked back to her own. It was more a closet than proper quarters, but it was neat and clean and better than any other sleeping place Kyra could remember. As she sat down on the bed she decided that, Force or no Force, she wanted to stay with Jao and Ania both. She needed to be with people who cared about her.

The talk with Ania had calmed her somehow, but she still wasn't ready to sleep. After sitting in the dark for a few minutes she felt out and found her old toolbag hanging off the wall. She groped inside and felt the hard angles of the black pyramid she'd recovered on Socorro.

Before, her touch had sparked light from its edges and the light had resolved into the ghostly image of a woman. Now her fingertips traced circles on its glass-smooth surface and nothing happened. It seemed final proof that the magic had

gone out of her life. Though it had only been with her for a few short days, Kyra wanted the magic back. With its power she could have all the freedom she'd ever craved.

But she also knew that the Force was much greater than her. It might return, it might not. That fate was out of her hands. Feeling melancholy but calm, Kyra put that black pyramid inside her bag, laid down on the bed, and finally slept.



## Chapter Twenty-Six

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One moment *Mynock* was floating beside the captured Sith shuttle, both ships surrounded in all directions by parsecs of pure nothing, with only faint stars lit against the interstellar black. The next moment hyperspace-streaks collapsed into wedge-shaped metal hulls of Imperial star destroyers and attack frigates. Soon the great warships had surrounded them on all sides, dwarfing the two smaller vessels.

“You know,” Deliah observed as she peered through the cockpit viewport, “I have *not* missed this.”

“You and me both,” Cade agreed. Dead ahead was a great white destroyer with big black Imperial roundels on either flank, presumably the *Jagged Fel*.

He felt like a flitgnat about to splatter against a windshield, but that was the way he generally felt when around the galaxy’s great and mighty. Empress Marasiah was a step up from her daddy, to say nothing of Darth Krayt, but she still had the self-important reek of someone used to commanding ranks and armies. Authority had a way of twisting a person up inside and making them less a person than a symbol for others. He’d seen it happen to his father. When Kol had been head of the Jedi Order he’d withered beneath the weight of defeated dreams and others’ expectations, only recovering his inner strength at the very end. Cade didn’t know how the empress would sustain this crisis and he sure as every hell didn’t envy her.

A voice crackled over *Mynock*’s comm, stiff and Imperial. “Attention arriving vessels, a docking space has been

prepared for you aboard the *Jagged Fel*. Please follow our beacon and prepare to land.”

Cade checked the sensor board and marked the small, waiting hangar bay near the *Jagged Fel*’s bow. Hands on the control yoke, he gently edged *Mynock* forward. “Looks like she’s set us up with someplace private to roost. How considerate of her.”

“And they even said *please*,” Deliah smiled, mock-sweet. “Think we can get out of this without everyone in the galaxy knowing we’re still kicking?”

“Stranger things have happened,” Cade said, though he wasn’t expecting it. “Where’s Jariah’s ship?”

Deliah checked the sensor board. “On our right shoulder, flying smooth. Glad that Sith *bukee* didn’t give ‘em trouble.”

“Without the Force he ain’t Sith, just a *bukee*.” Cade said. He hoped it was true.

The *Jagged Fel*’s great bulk filled the viewport. Soon its landing tractor beam took hold and pulled them into the private hangar. Cade cut engines to zero, put on repulsors, and was ready when it came time to lower *Mynock* gently onto the landing deck.

Once the craft set down he rose from his seat and told Deliah, “Run final checks and lower the landing ramp, but don’t go outside until I’ve brought Talon.”

“Bring the droids out too?”

“Sure. We’ll let Threepio handle negotiations.”

“Pity the Imps.”

Cade made his way back to the crew lounge, where the scarlet-and-black Twi’lek sat on the same sofa she’d been planted on as they’d left the Vaxal system. If she’d slept during the intervening time, Cade hadn’t noticed. She sat back-stiff with hands bound behind her and greeted him with a blank face and blue-eyed stare. He still wasn’t used to that.

Not even bothering to wave a weapon at her, Cade said, “Journey’s over, *cheeka*. On your feet. It’s time to meet the empress.”

Talon remained seated. Cade looked sideways at her keeper. Even without the Force she was a danger, and AG-37 had been the best choice to keep watch. It wasn’t like you could wait for an assassin droid to get tired.

"How was she?" he asked. "Give you any trouble?"

"None whatsoever," the droid said.

"Great. I could get used to a galaxy without Sith."

"A galaxy without Sith is a galaxy without Jedi," Talon said. "One demands the other."

He didn't reward her with a response. The worse of it was, she was probably right. With a flick of the wrist and a tug of the Force, he stood Talon to her feet. She staggered, rebalanced, and stood up straight all without losing her impassive mask. Despite that, Cade could read her emotions in the Force better than he'd ever been able before. She raged at her helplessness, but it wasn't the kind of rage Sith drew strength from. Rather it was a sullen, stewing anger, mixed with self-pity he hadn't expected from her.

He gave her another Force-shove, lighter than before. "Get marching, darlin'. You first."

Mustering as much dignity as she could, Talon marched out of the cabin and down the hall. Deliah, blaster drawn, was waiting to shepherd her the rest of the way. Cade followed behind them and fell in with R2-D2 and C-3PO.

"I must say, this is quite fascinating," the protocol droid said. "Artoo has been filling me in on the development of the Empire since my untimely accident all those years ago. It sounds quite evolved from the organization I knew."

"They don't blow up planets anymore if that's what you mean."

"Indeed. That was a most regrettable period of history. However, I am quite interested in meeting Empress Marasiah. Did you know I once used to read bedtime stories to her great-grandmother? 'The Little Lost Bantha Cub' was Jaina's favorite, as I recall."

R2-D2 made a rude blurting noise.

"Me, self-important? Really, Artoo, you're one to talk."

Cade ignored them and followed Talon and Deliah down the landing ramp. The inside of the hangar bay was all black deck and sleek gray walls, clean and blunt and oh-so-Imperial. The other ship had set down as well, and he looked across the deck to see Jariah and Gunner walking toward them, a bound Eli Horn leading the way.

Cade was about to ask if the prisoner had behaved when the door on the far side of the hangar opened. The welcoming party was impressive: two squadrons of storm-troopers, six Imperial Knights in ceremonial reds, one officer in an admiral's uniform and one empress in pretty white robes and gold-metal crown.

As they got closer he marked familiar faces. He wasn't surprised to see Antares Draco at the empress' side, nor Admiral Rulf Yage, though by Gunner's intake of breath she hadn't expected her father. What really got his attention was the woman in modified red armor with short red hair and slanted scars across her face. As the groups closed distance Azlyn's eyes never left Cade, and her face never lost its expression of slack-jawed amazement.

There was a lot to say and a lot of different ways to start the conversation. It was Gunner who snapped a crisp salute and said, "Commander Gunner Yage reporting, sirs. I'd like to offer my apology for allowing Agent Corde to escape my surveillance."

"At ease, Commander. You managed to bring quite an interesting set of guests aboard." The empress' eyes shifted to Cade. "Thank you for coming, Master Skywalker. Your appearance is most appreciated."

"No problem. My stake in this is personal." With a prod of the Force, he nudged Talon and Eli forward. "You're welcome for the gifts."

"Indeed." Marasiah looked the captives up and down, and though she kept it from her face, Cade could tell that she was quite pleased to have two Sith helpless in front of her. "We have much to discuss. I've arranged a private place for us to talk. Guards, take these two prisoners to the brig and place them under constant in-person surveillance."

"No," Talon said, loud and firm.

Marasiah raised a brow. "No? You presume to command me?"

"Your discussion would be incomplete without us. You need a plan to approach Darth Maladi. As fellow Sith, we know her better than anyone."

"From what I could tell," Cade said, "Not even her Sith buddies really knew Maladi that well."

“Still,” Talon said, eyes on the empress, “We are your best source of information in this.”

Marasiah regarded her coolly. “I’m glad you didn’t try and say we’re allies now.”

“I’m not that foolish.”

“Good. Then we’ll all go together. Guards, take these prisoners to the conference room. We’ll follow.”

A set of stormtroopers broke formation and surrounded the two Sith. Talon and Eli stumbled forward- prodded by Marasiah, Cade realized- and began marching for the hangar exit. As everyone else started to fall out, AG-37 said, “With the empress’ permission, I would like to stay with the ship.”

Marasiah regarded the droid. “You’re Ania Solo’s companion, aren’t you? I’m surprised to see you with this company.”

“There had been recent association between Skywalker’s company and mine. In fact, Ania and Jao Assam are on their way here now. I would like to stay with *Mynock* in case they try to hail it.”

“Very well.” Marasiah gave Cade an appraising look but said nothing. Instead she turned and headed for the exit, and the rest of her party joined her. Gunner fell in beside her father while the two other droids shuffled forward eagerly. Cade and Jariah started ahead but Deliah grabbed Cade by the hook of his arm.

“I’m staying with *Mynock* too,” she said. “Don’t want the Imp scraggers messing with my ship and *especially* not Rav’s loot.”

With everything else Cade almost forgot the fact that he was now stinking rich. “You think they’ll mess with A-gee?”

“Just trying to be sure. Besides, I’d rather do that than chat with Her Mightiness.”

“Sure thing.” He leaned in, kissed her cheek, and pulled away.

Cade joined Jariah in walking through the crisp, clean, oh-so-Imperial halls of the star destroyer. The Sith travelled at the front of the train of people, the Imperial Knights in the middle, Marasiah and the Yages in the rear. As the party moved along C-3PO shuffled past R2-D2 and said, “Greetings, Empress Fel. If I may be so bold, I am See-

Threepio, human-cyborg relations. It appears I have quite a history with your illustrious family. In fact—

“Another time, Threepio,” Cade said.

Marasiah gave the protocol droid a curious look. “Is this a new addition to your party, Skywalker?”

R2-D2 responded with a series of hoots and whistles. Cade shrugged. “Let’s just say it’s a long story.”

When they arrived at the conference room the storm-troopers spread out down the adjoining hallway, allowing Draco and Azlyn to usher the Sith through first. Cade, Jariah, the Yages and the two droids followed them into a chamber with one long window looking out on a nearby star destroyer and an oval table in the center. Cade was surprised to see more familiar faces: one gray-bearded Knight he marked as Treis Sinde and one dark-skinned, short-haired woman in civvie clothes. Jariah vectored for the latter with a big grin on his face; Cade remembered he’d squeezed in some good times with Anj Dahl towards the end of the war with Krayt.

His own attention fixed on the two big, furry figures in Jedi robes. He wasn’t surprised to see two of the Order’s most senior Masters, given the stakes. K’Kruhk didn’t look surprised to see him; the old Whiphid greeted Cade with a silent nod. Lowbacca, more excited, released a happy trilling roar which struck Cade as unusual because he’d never known the Wookiee well.

That was when the golden protocol droid shuffled around from behind Cade and raised his canted arms as high as his frame would allow. “My goodness! Master Lowbacca! I must say, you are looking *very* well!”

Lowbacca’s furry bulk shook with laughter as he draped a long arm over C-3PO’s shoulders. He barked gratitude again and C-3PO said, “Master Lowbacca is quite grateful to you for recovering me. He’s quite interested in learning where I have been for all these years... Unfortunately my memory engrams still have some blank spots.”

Cade shook his head in disbelief. “You used to read him bedtime stories too?”

“Oh no, Master Cade. However, I once provided the template for Master Lowbacca’s own personal translator droid. In fact—”

"This is a fascinating reunion, but we have other things to discuss," the empress said. Her controlled voice commanded attention from the entire room.

This didn't feel the occasion for sitting, so everyone formed a standing circle around the table. Talon and Eli Horn were kept on opposite ends of the oval; Cade and Marasiah faces each other across the narrow midsection, the former flanked by the two Jedi and the latter by her scarlet Knights.

The empress placed hands on the tabletop and said, "Please state your intentions, Master Skywalker."

"You know my intentions. I'm going to go to Maladi's hideout on Te Hasa and get my mother back."

"Why did Maladi ask for you? Say it, so everyone can know."

Cade took a breath and looked around the table. "She knows I can still touch the Force. At first I thought I was just lucky and not infected yet... but we heard Jao Assam's gone Force-blind, and if he's got Maladi's bug I should too, since we've been together for a week." He let his eyes rest on Marasiah again. "Apparently it has something to do with our oh-so-special genes."

"Indeed. But she asked for you. Why?"

"I don't know," Cade said honestly. "She and Mom had a rivalry going back a long time. And me and Maladi... Last time I saw her was on Wayland, where she set a trap for me and my crew. Didn't end well for her. Maybe she wants to get back at me."

"And yet you plan on going into her lair?" asked Treis Sinde.

"She's got my mom. I don't really have a choice, do I?"

"Did Agent Corde specify how you should arrive?" asked Admiral Yage. "Gree worlds are supposed to repel any foreign ship."

"I don't know. I'm pretty sure Maladi knows I still have the *Mynock*. She'll probably tell her Gree buddies to let that ship through, and only that one. So you probably won't be able to sneak your whole invasion fleet in with my. Sorry."

"This is not an invasion fleet," Marasiah said. "This is a show of force. I'm prepared to use it, but I plan on negotiating official access to Te Hasa first."

Lowbacca roared and C-3PO translated, "Master Lowbacca reminds us that all foreigners who wish to speak to the Gree officially must announce themselves at Asation. Ships near any other world are considered hostile and fired upon."

"If it does come to a fight, what kind of fight are we looking at?" Gunner looked at her father.

"Unknown," the admiral admitted. "Traditional Gree weapons supposedly use concentrated gravity pulses instead of projectiles or plasma. Our shields are untested against those."

"All the more reason to avoid a fight," Marasiah said. "We'll take this fleet to Asation and compel the Gree authorities. You, Master Skywalker, will go to Te Hasa. You're to stall Maladi and disable her if possible. As soon as we can, we'll send a shipful of troopers to secure her facility."

"If that is the case, Empress," C-3PO said, "I would like to volunteer my services."

R2-D2 whistled curiously and Marasiah asked, "For what purpose? Are you fluent in Gree, droid?"

"Oh, indeed. I am fluent in over six million forms of communication, including the Gree language, which as I'm sure you know is extremely nuanced and notoriously difficult to translate, even for computer systems lacking my specialized protocol directives."

"Have you conversed with a Gree before, droid?" asked a skeptical Admiral Yage.

"Why, no sir, I've never had the opportunity. Gree are never seen outside their Enclave, as you know. I've always wanted to encounter one and am quite eager for the chance to do so."

Marasiah's face twisted halfway between amused and befuddled. Her eyes darted to Cade who shrugged as if to say, *Your call*.

"I... could appreciate your services," she told C-3PO.

The golden droid seemed to tremble with excitement. "Thank you for selecting me, Your Majesty. I promise I won't disappoint."

Darth Talon, who'd been like a statue until now, asked, "Do we know if Lady Maladi can access the Force?"



"Mom said she couldn't," said Cade. "I'll trust that."

"If even Maladi can't use it, does that mean there's no antidote?" Eli asked.

"We can assume nothing, young Horn," K'Kruhk said. The young human flinched at his own name; Cade wondered how deep his and K'Kruhk's relationship had gone.

"Here's what we should assume," Gunner said. "Even if we do get clearance to land troops on Te Hasa, Maladi will probably get word they're coming."

"Agreed," her father sighed. "The woman has ears everywhere."

It was a good point, and it left the room in consternation for a few moments. Then Jariah said, "There might be a way around it. If we modify *Mynock's* comm systems, put the transceiver into a feedback loop with itself then set it to broadcast. It'll send out white noise and totally scuzz up any other comm units close by. We do that and we can keep Maladi from getting word from the outside."

Cade stared at him. "We can?"

"I think so." He shrugged. "Heard Blue talk about how she'd done it once on another ship."

"And it worked?"

"Kept the ships close by from using their comms. *Mynock* won't be able to send or receive either, though. And as soon as Maladi realizes what we're doing, she'll probably try and turn it off."

"Then someone should stay aboard *Mynock* and guard it," Talon said. "That begs the question: Who accompanies Skywalker into Maladi's lair?"

"No way it's you, *schutta*," Jariah scoffed.

Talon ignored him and looked between Cade and Marasiah. "Do either of you understand a Sith mind? No. Could either of you anticipate what traps Maladi might have place inside? Of course not."

"I'll take my chances," Cade snorted.

"As your mother did?"

She had him there. Cade swallowed his rebuke and said, "There's another problem. If we've got the comms all jammed up, how am I supposed to know when backup's on the way?"

"There are other ways to communicate," the empress said.

Without a word, Marasiah's mind reached out to touch his. He'd never been close to the woman; her presence felt unfamiliar and cold, but he didn't fall back from it. He'd not felt this firm a connection with another Force-user in a long time, and he realized with a start that he'd never feel anyone else's.

It sunk in then, finally. Unless Ania Solo had some buried talent still to be uncovered, Cade and Marasiah were the last two Force-users left in the galaxy.

Maybe they were the last ones there'd ever be.

Understanding chilled him. He found no comfort in the empress's touch; through their Force-connection she let show how terrified she was, and how badly she was trying to hide it for the sake of everyone else.

His memory fell back to when they'd first met- it felt like forever ago- and she'd told him she understood him like no one else, because they'd both been born to shoulder a great legacy. Cade had rejected that, like he'd rejected everything and everybody in those days, but he saw how right she'd been in the end.

Cade realized the rest of the room was staring and he gently pushed Marasiah's mind away. "Okay, I get your point. Guess that'll work as good as anything."

Before Cade could say anything, the comlink in his pocket vibrated. He heard muted buzzing from a few other comms and pulled out his own.

"It's me," he said. "What's going on?"

"*Free Agent* has exited hyperspace and is on an approach vector with this star destroyer," AG-37 said. "Please make sure the empress doesn't blow up my ship."

"You got it." Cade flicked off the comm. "Looks like we've got more joining the party. That was-"

"I've already granted Ania Solo clearance to land," the empress said as Sinde pocketed his own comm. "We'll table this conversation until they've joined us."

Cade would rather get the talking over with and start acting, but he acquiesced. Sinde and Draco left the room, probably to fetch the newcomers. Admiral Yage made his way to the empress and started talking to her about fleet preparations.

Jariah cracked a tension-breaking joke and made Anj laugh. The two Sith stayed on either end of the table, silent and stoic. C-3PO decided now would be a good time to catch up with Lowbacca and he peeled the Wookiee a few steps back from the table.

With that ginger-furred wall removed, Cade found himself looking right at Azlyn Rae. She looked back. Something balled in his chest and it to speak.

He managed to say, "So. Looks like you're still an Imp Knight."

"I'm not sure I'm anything anymore," she said.

Her voice was guarded; even with the Force her emotions were hard to read. He sensed she was repressing her own feelings toward Cade, and he knew they'd be mixed at best. He'd deserved that. When he'd used his Force-healing powers to keep her alive after Had Abbaddon he'd known she felt satisfied and ready to die, but he'd done it anyway. He'd condemned her to a life she hadn't wanted not for her sake, but for his own.

He'd never been good at apologies. He couldn't get one out now either.

"If there's a way to mess up your midi-chlorians and take the Force away, there's got to be a way to fix 'em. And Maladi would know."

"And if she doesn't?"

"Then we'll *make* her figure it out."

Azlyn smiled sadly. "You know... in some ways you're still the same Cade you've ever been."

In that marked face he could still see the girl she'd been on Ossus. Unscarred physically or emotionally, she'd been more earnest than Cade and more exuberant than Shado. On discovering new Force talents or honing her skills, her infectious joy would spread to her two companions through the bond they'd shared, lifting them all up.

But that was all long ago.

"You heard from Shado since this started?"

Her expression fell. "He was with Anj and me. The triumvirate sent us to find the Mandalorians who'd helped spread the virus. We tracked them to the Second Wheel at Ord Mantell, but..."

He could feel her deep sorrow. “Dead?”

“No. But badly injured. We had to leave him on the Wheel.”

“Stang.”

“When this is all over, and he’s recovered, you should talk to him.”

“I guess I should.”

After a sullen pause she asked, “Why did you let everyone think you were dead?”

“Not everybody. I let Mom know.” He knew that sounded weak.

“But why did you play dead? There were a lot of people who’d wished you were alive.”

“Listen, half the damn galaxy knew me by then, and I never wanted to be famous. I did my job. The Force kept hammering it into me that I needed to kill Krayt. That it was my destiny. Well, I did it. I’d put in my service and after that destiny could kark off.” He shrugged weakly. “That’s how it was supposed to work.”

“You may have gotten your wish after all.”

“No. Everybody else got my wish. The Force just won’t leave me alone.”

“Honestly, Cade, I’d give anything to trade places right now.”

“I’d let you if I could.”

The door to the conference room opened. Sinde and Draco escorted two more attendees to the meeting: Ania Solo and Jao Assam, which meant Sauk and Kyra had stayed with the ship. Everyone fell into their previous positions around the table, and Lowbacca’s bulk form eclipsed Azlyn. Nothing had been resolved in that conversation, nothing solved. The news about Shado cast everything in a deeper pall.

The two newcomers joined the circle, wedging between the empress and Rulf Yage. Ania looked over the other woman, her cousin, and said, “I’ve got to admit, I was hoping I’d never see you again.”

The empress’ knights stifferened in offense. Cade bent across the table and tried for levity. “Don’t take it hard. People tell me that all the time.”

"I'm sure they do," Marasiah deadpanned. "Admiral Yage, please summarize the situation thus far."

Yage did just that, outlining the plan with military efficiency. The man gave no outward sign of it, but Cade could tell the man was concerned about this ex-wife, just like beneath her scowls Gunn was concerned about her mother. Despite all Morrigan Corde and Nyna Calixte had done to them, they still wanted to help her.

But Cade already knew she had that effect on people.

When Yage was done Ania said, "Okay, excuse me if this is a stupid question... But how does this *work*? You just get a flu and lose the Force?"

Cade snorted, amused at her honesty, and Jariah muttered, "Kinda been wondering that myself."

"The disease was tailored by Darth Maladi specifically to disable Force-users," Sinde explained. "She developed it in the laboratory on Te Hasa and kidnapped multiple Jedi and Imperial Knights to use as live test subjects. When she perfected it, she sent infected subjects to us and to the Sith, before those subjects started showing symptoms. By the time we knew what was happening, the contagion had spread too far to stop."

"I still don't get how this thing takes away your Force-powers."

K'Kruhk said, "It was designed specifically to mutate our midi-chlorians and cut off our connection to the Force."

"Mutate your what?"

"Midi-chlorians," Jao said. "They're organisms without our cells. They're part of every living being and the more someone has inside them, the more easily they can touch the Force."

"And this disease cripples everybody's midi-whatevers..." Ania pointed two fingers: one at Cade, one at Marasiah. "Except for you two. Because you're..."

"We don't know the reason," Marasiah said. "But I'd be very interested to look at yours, Ania Solo."

Ania didn't like the sound of that; she hugged herself tight. "I don't have enough of your midi-whatevers to use the Force. I couldn't open up that Sith holocron thing."

That raised worried looks across the room. Cade said, "Don't worry, I took care of it. The gist is, without working midi-chlorians, nobody can touch the Force. It's that simple."

"That's not true," Eli said. Heads turned to his end of the table. He flinched a little at all those eyes and didn't seem very Sith at all; just a confused, overwhelmed young man.

K'Kruhk exhaled. "Young Horn is correct. There is at least one being in this galaxy who was born with no midi-chlorians at all, but can use the Force."

Cade's memory stirred. "Wait, I get who you're talking about. It was that Vong, what was his name?"

"Khat Lah," Horn said.

That was it. Cade barely remembered the Yuuzhan Vong. He'd been a young warrior, two meters tall, big and strong but not scary like even Jedi-friendly Vong could be. Partially it was because he'd lacked the tattoos and scars common among his kind, but there's also been something thoughtful about his demeanor. He recalled Khat Lah spending time with his grandmother Jade before her death midway through the Sith-Imperial War. Cade had last seen the warrior shortly before the massacre at Ossus, and to his amazement, he'd been able to sense the Vong clearly in the Force.

The Sith had come hours later. There hadn't been time for questions and Cade had barely thought about Khat Lah since.

"What happened to that Vong after Ossus?" Cade asked. "Could he really use the Force?"

"Indeed," K'Kruhk said. "He and I escaped together along with many padawans, including Eli Horn." He tilted his tusks toward the young Sith, who didn't reply. "For several years, I trained him. The Force awed him, and he learned much in a short time."

"How is it possible a Yuuzhan Vong could use the Force?" Marasiah was perplexed; it was clearly the first she'd heard of this.

"It was never entirely clear. Partly, it was a boon granted by Zonama Sekot. The living world's ancestor Yuuzha'tar stripped the Yuuzhan Vong of the force eons ago. Khat Lah was the first it decided to return the gift to."

"That was only the start," Eli said. "Khat Lah said he had to unlock the Force within himself, through struggle and revelation."

"Perhaps he did, though not in the way a Sith would imagine, young Horn."

"So what happened to him?" Cade pressed.

K'Kruhk said, "Almost four years ago, before the war against Krayt reached its peak, Khat Lah went off on his own. He hoped to spread the Force to more of his people and sought to learn more about the ancient Jedi. I told him where he could search and warned him to avoid the Sith. I... have not heard from him since."

"So he could be dead?" Azlyn's voice was tinged with disappointment.

"Khat Lah was a survivor," Eli said. "And a warrior. I'm sure he's out there somewhere."

More subdued, Talon said, "If he fell, it was not to a Sith. I would have heard."

Lowbacca released a roar and C-3PO said, "Master Lowbacca brings a valid point. We can do nothing about Khat Lah now. We must concern ourselves with Lady Maladi."

"Agreed," said Marasiah. "Skywalker, you'll be getting backup, and you also won't be going alone."

Cade bristled instinctively. "My ship, my rules, sweetheart. I came here out of courtesy."

"He's right, Skywalker," Gunner said. "Even you aren't dumb enough to walk into a secret Sith hideout by yourself."

"It's still my ship. Jariah?"

His friend nodded seriously. "If you want me and Blue by your side, you've got it."

"Good. I'll need somebody to protect *Mynock* and make sure that jamming field stays up."

"If you're going to confront one Sith," Darth Talon said. "It would be smart to have another on your side."

"You're *not* on our side," Gunner sneered.

"At the moment we are," Talon said, just as hard. She'd recovered a little of her old poise. "Every one of us wants an antidote to Maladi's disease."

"We won't allow the Sith to get a monopoly on it," Sinde warned.

Talon turned those new blue eyes on Cade, imploring him without words. He found himself considering, for the reasons she'd suggested and others. He didn't need to trust her; he knew he couldn't, and with the Force that meant he already had an advantage.

"My ship, my rules," he decided. "Talon comes with me. I'll send her in first so she can point out Maladi's traps. Or spring 'em. The Sith *bukee* has to stay."

He watched Eli carefully; the young man looked straight at Talon, imploring, hoping she'd try and get him to come with her. The Twi'lek caught his eyes, held them, then looked to Cade. "I'll accept that." In the Force he faintly felt acceptance tainted by regret; she felt a duty to her apprentice, and shame for letting him down. That might help him or it might not, but it was good to know.

"Skywalker, I strongly advice against that," Marasiah said in her best empress voice.

"Even without the Force she is dangerous," K'Kruhk added.

Old Jedi didn't phase Cade much, royals even less. "My ship, my rules," he repeated, then looked to his half-sister. "That means you get an invitation. Figured you'd want one."

Gunner nodded immediately. "I accept."

"I need to come too," Jao spoke up.

Cade regarded him. "Need?"

"I already came a long way to be here. I'm not just sitting on the sidelines."

Ania looked at him anxiously, like she was willing him to back down, but he wouldn't. The man radiated conviction and, yes, need. Cade hadn't been much impressed by the guy before, but now he saw a man who'd be useful in the fight ahead.

"You're got your invitation," Cade nodded. "But I'm drawing the line there. Maladi ain't gonna like *any* uninvited guests, let alone three of 'em. At least this way we're well-rounded. One Jedi, one Imp Knight, one Sith. And one soldier to keep us in line."

"*You're* a Jedi?" Gunner looked incredulous and revolted at once.



"I am," Cade said, and meant it. "I'm the last damned Jedi in the universe. And believe me, I'm not happy about it either."

"I'm... not really an Imperial Knight," added Jao. "I wasn't even before I lost the Force."

"You're close enough for me." He looked at Marasiah. "That fine by you, Empress?"

She considered him carefully, and he felt a grudging respect. He was happy with that; it was the most he'd ever get.

"It's acceptable," she said.

"Good." Cade pounded fist into palm. "Enough chat. Let's get this thing moving."

Cade was on the way. Morrigan told herself that over and over to keep from going mad. She didn't know when he'd show up or who he'd bring with him. When she'd called him using Maladi's comm system she'd spoken only to him and asked nothing about Gunner, but Cade had dropped enough subtle clues that he'd retrieved his half-sister and would take all this information to the empress. What they could do for her, Morrigan didn't know, but help was coming and they'd find a way to overcome Maladi's schemes. She had to believe that.

After the call, Maladi had shot her full of some other clear liquid, supposedly the delaying agent for the poison she'd been infected with. While waiting for that injection Morrigan had begun to feel nausea, but she couldn't say for sure if that had been because of the poison or if she was just psychosomatic. Maladi was a genius with lethal concoctions, but she was also good at mind games.

Morrigan had settled in for a long wait. Maladi left her chained to the operations table and Morrigan had spent several hours vainly trying to slip, wriggle, or break free. Hours drained away after that; for a while she crawled back on the table and tried to sleep. Several times the door above opened and one of the Maladi's Gree slithered down the spiral walkway on those writhing tentacles, bearing either food or another injection to suppress Maladi's poison.

The first time she'd been visited, Morrigan had asked the Gree, "Do you know who your master is? What she's been doing to the rest of the galaxy?"

She hadn't expected to arouse or convert the alien; she simply wanted to know. After injecting the solution into her arm the Gree had withdrawn the arm-tentacle into its robe and stared at her with those huge all-black eyes. Finally it responded with a series of high-pitched squeals and sporadic clicks. A translation came through the breathing apparatus attached to the lower half of its face.

"The gods began to leave this galaxy long ago," the crisp metallic voice had said. "Lady Maladi is completing their departure."

Morrigan had absolutely no idea what that meant. She didn't even know if the Gree's translator was working properly. She'd tried asking more- what gods, how did they leave- but the Gree had refrained from answering and retreated up the spiral walkway. When she was visited next it was, best she could tell, the same alien, and she didn't bother trying to converse.

However, after her uncomfortable nap, Darth Maladi returned to the chamber. At first she ignored her prisoner totally, coming all the way to the bottom of the spiral to retrieve a handful of unpleasant-looking tools. As she stared back for the walkway Morrigan called, "Any news from Cade?"

Maladi stopped, turned, and looked at her. Morrigan still wasn't used to those dark-brown eyes. "No," Maladi said. "But I will give him time. I'll keep you alive a while longer."

"How charitable. Can I ask a question?"

"What question?"

"I tried to talk to one of your Gree. He didn't tell me much, but he did say that his gods had left a long time ago, and you're finishing the job. Does that actually mean anything or is everyone here as crazy as you?"

She regretted the snide remark as soon as it came out. There was no telling what might make this new Darth Maladi snap. The Devaronian clasped the tools to her chest and took a few steps closer to Morrigan, but stayed outside of kicking range.

“Yes, I know you talked to Kavont’k. It told me.”

“It?”

“Gree do not have sexes as humanoids do. Or rather, they have eight. Reproduction is complicated. They only do it every few centuries.” Maladi spun long hair around a finger.

“What was your question?”

“Was there any truth to what he said?”

“There is much truth here. There’s a chamber in this place filled with ancient Gree texts from forty, fifty thousand years ago. Kavont’k and Rakat’l have been translating them for three centuries. The secrets in them opened my eyes.”

“Opened them to what?”

Maladi’s look turned curious. “Why do you care, Calixte-Corde? I know you. You treasure knowledge, yes, but only knowledge that you can use for your own ends.”

That had certainly been true for Nyna Calixte, and maybe the first Morrigan Corde that Calixte had replaced. The Morrigan who’d replaced Calixte understood there was more to this galaxy than she could ever know or use. Deluding herself otherwise had caused untold pain to herself and others.

“If I’m going to die here,” she said plainly, “Shouldn’t I at least know what it’s all about?”

“Yes. Perhaps you should,” Maladi allowed. She took one step closer, still safe from Morrigan’s legs. “The Force was not what it once was. For the Gree, fifty thousand years ago, every single one of them could touch it. Feeling it was as natural as sight and smell, and with training they could use it. It was like that for the Kwa, the Rakata, the ancient Killiks. All life was in harmony with the Force. *All* of it.”

It sounded like what Kol had told her of the Zonama Sekot, itself a descendant of the original Yuuzhan Vong homeworld. According to the extragalactic race’s legends, they’d once lived in perfect communion with each other and their gods. Kol had hypothesized that these legends recalled a time where their species had been deeply connected to the Force.

“What changed?” Morrigan asked.

“The Force withdrew. The ancient races had once served masters. They’re called many names. You’ve heard of Celestials?”

"Myths and legends." The sort of knowledge she'd always dismissed as irrelevant, because she couldn't use it.

"Even the Gree never understood them. A hundred thousand years ago they were ancient. They moved planets and summoned stars. To wield power like they did they must have been *soaked* in the Force. The Gree worshipped them like gods... until they left."

"For where? Did they go to another galaxy?"

"I cannot say. The Gree archives are... unclear. Uncertain. After the Celestials left, the new races and younger civilizations took to the stars- human, Devaronian, others- but for them the Force only spoke to rare peoples. The Gree archives document this. And in time, the Force withdrew itself even from the ancients it once favored. The Rakata powered their Infinite Empire with the dark side, literally fueled it, but the Force left them suddenly. They were blind and deaf to it. Their brutal empire collapsed within two generations. They didn't know the cause. They blamed a plague. I think, perhaps, it was this that gave Darth Acheron the idea to develop a new virus targeting midi-chlorians, one that would effect all species. Perhaps. I won't speak for the dead. But listen, Corde-Calixte. The Force withdrew, went silent, and I asked myself why. Why?"

She looked at Morrigan as though imploring an answer. She admitted, "I have no idea."

"Neither do I," Maladi sighed, like she'd been defeated. "The Force is a mystery. *The* mystery. We analyze it, dissect it, try to calculate it. The Sith try to draw their desires from it. So do the Jedi, but they drape their greed in noble platitudes. In the end we won't understand it. We can't even control it."

"Is that why you tried to... shut it down? You're mad because you can't control it?"

"No." Maladi shook her head. "I'm not that petty."

"Then why?"

Maladi half-turned away. She looked at Morrigan sideways, cautiously. "I did this for us all. Jedi, Sith, Imperial Knight. I did it to liberate us."

"From the Force?"

"From ourselves." Her free hand made a fist and tapped her chest. "Your son would understand."

“I doubt that.”

“He will. I know he will. He was in my mind, and I was in his.” Maladi bowed her head, hiding her face with a curtain of hair. Draped in black with a fist still clutched to her heart, she looked to Morrigan like a woman in mourning.

“Be patient,” Maladi muttered. “You’ll understand before the end. Understanding is important to you, isn’t it?”

Morrigan looked at the shackle on her wrist. After all her scheming, all her questing for knowledge as a means of control, she’d ended up here, chained to a table in a long-dead Sith Lord’s laboratory, pawn in some mad, cataclysmic scheme to remake the galaxy in ways she’d never dreamed. All the while poison pumped through her veins, waiting to make dust of all her vain ambitions.

Maladi was right. Understanding was all she had left. That, and protecting her son.

The woman in black did not wait for an answer. Without lifting her head or looking at Morrigan, Maladi walked up the corkscrew walkway and out of the chamber, leaving silence behind.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

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Ania Solo had seen a lot of tucked-off corners of the galaxy, but she never thought she'd go to Gree space. She'd heard spacers talk about their sealed-off Enclave, mostly swapping second- or third-hand rumors about strange technology so ancient even the cephalopod aliens had forgotten how to use it.

Ania was on the bridge when the *Jagged Fel* reverted from hyperspace over their gateway world of Asation. Through the viewport the planet was just a blue-green sphere sitting dead ahead, no different from countless other worlds. Right now the empress' flagship approached the planet alone, though the plan was that the fleet they'd brought with them would decant from hyperspace at the edge of the star system, not close enough to threaten the planet but visible enough to get their point across.

That assumed the Gree would read the empress' actions as intended. Even though their Enclave abutted the Empire's historic territory, the *Jagged Fel*'s shipboard encyclopedia had only limited information on their politics and less about their culture and customs. The empress had an interesting conversation ahead of her.

For her part, Ania was just a spectator. Her past help to Marasiah was the only reason she was allowed on the bridge now; Sauk, Kyra, and AG-37 were down in the landing bay with *Free Agent*. It was hard to keep her thoughts off Jao. *Mynock* would be arriving at Te Hasa soon, and would enter a place filled with uncertain danger. He'd insisted on going anyway, and she hadn't even tried to talk him out of it.

Jao was headstrong in his own way, and never so much as when he thought the Force was telling him what to do. Ania had never understood what Jedi and Imperial Knights meant when they said the Force was moving them; deep down she'd always suspected they were just doing what *they* wanted and invoked the will of the Force to rationalize it to themselves. Jao didn't have that justification anymore but he was charging in anyway, and it was still all about the Force. Apparently he'd rather risk death than live without it. Ania almost envied him for having something he prized so strongly.

The *Jagged Fel* lurched forward, and steadily Asation swelled to fill the viewport. The empress waited patiently at the rear of the bridge, silent and regal in her white robes. Two red-armored guards stood behind her, along with one gold protocol droid. After what seemed like forever, Admiral Yage reported, "Majesty, a spacecraft has rounded the planet's ecliptic and is vectoring toward us. It's quite large. I estimate it's six times our mass."

That stirred a lot of tense looks between the crew. Marasiah let nothing show. "Send a hail on all frequencies. Tell that I've arrived on behalf of the Galactic Federation Triumvirate, and that I respectfully request an audience."

As the message was sent, Ania stepped around the edge of the bridge, closer to the viewport. She spotted something moving against Asation's blue face, tiny at this distance but steadily growing larger. It seemed to be disc-shaped and thickest in the center, with layers of superstructure piled atop one another.

"We've gotten a response, Empress," Yage said from the comm station.

Marasiah remained where she was. "Go ahead."

Yage bent close to read from the console. "They extend their greetings and request the purpose of this visit."

"Tell them we seek passage in their space to apprehend a criminal who has attacked the Galactic Federation. This fugitive has been operating from Te Hasa for the past two years. Tell them we will *not* hold their government responsible for harboring this criminal, so long as they comply with our request."

Yage relayed the message. Ania watched as the huge Gree ship swelled closer and closer. She couldn't make out any weapons on it. She couldn't make out any traditional propulsion either, or any command towers or communications arrays. That thing really was like nothing she'd seen before.

Eventually Yage reported, "The Gree will consider your request for extradition when given full account of the criminal's offenses."

A bureaucratic log-jam was exactly what they didn't need right now. Marasiah said, "We do not request extradition. We request permission to go to Te Hasa now and apprehend the criminal ourselves."

Yage relayed the message. A tense minute later he said, "That is unacceptable. The Gree will not permit foreigners to enter their space."

"Remind the Gree that they *have* permitted a foreigner to live and work on Te Hasa for at least two standard years." Anger was finally creeping to Marasiah's voice.

After another minute, Yage said, "They insist we provide details on the criminal's actions and her current whereabouts."

"Then they deny knowing about Maladi?"

"It... appears so, Empress."

This 'conversation' could go on forever. Marasiah said, "Request a face-to-face discussion with one of their delegates. That delegate must be empowered to grant us access to their space."

Two tense minutes after the message was sent, Yage reported, "The Gree accept this request. They will launch a small vessel momentarily. Your presence will be accepted there." Yage's frown deepened. "Empress, they request you come without armed guards."

Ania expected the empress to balk, but Marasiah said, "Agreed. Masters Draco and Sinde will come with me, unarmed. So will See-Threepio. Prepare my shuttle for immediate launch. We'll be down there shortly."

Yage looked like he wanted to argue more, but he said, "Yes, Majesty."



Ania glanced out the viewport again. She spotted a piece of that great disc's superstructure detach from the rest. A small solar sail unfolded behind it and the oval-shaped object pushed outward, toward the *Jagged Fel*. There was something organic and elegant about that ship, and Ania's attention clung to it for a few seconds. When she looked back down the bridge, she caught last glimpses of red, white, and gold as the empress' party left the bridge. Whatever happened next to decide the fate of Jao and the Force, and it had nothing to do with her.

When *Mynock* dropped out of hyperspace and Jao got his first look at Te Hasa, his first thought was how incredible it was that everything had changed at a place like this. It was an unlovely world, with no oceans or forests to break up unending stretches of arid desert, rocky plain, and occasional mountain spines. Only a few clouds, themselves streaks of pale methane-yellow, blurred the planet's dayside face.

"You see the satellites?" Cade asked. He was on his feet, leaning over the pilot's chair as Deliah guided them toward the planet. Jariah manned the co-pilot's seat and Jao craned to look from the chair behind him. R2-D2 huddled in the rear of the cockpit, where he'd plugged into the ship's main computer. *Mynock's* other passengers were back in the crew lounge, where Gunner Yage kept two eyes and a blaster rifle trained on Darth Talon.

Jariah checked his sensor-board. "Yeah, they're around."

"Armed?" asked Jao. He squinted but couldn't see anything glinting in Te Hasa's orbit.

"I don't even know what a Gree weapon looks like," the other man muttered.

"Well, they're not shooting yet." Deliah looked back at Cade. "What happens now, *meeshku*? There's a whole planet down there. Where do we find Maladi and your mom?"

"They weren't really clear on that part. Slow down and drop into steady orbit."

Deliah gripped the control yoke. "How close you want me to get to those satellites?"

"No closer than you have to."

“Maladi wouldn’t have set this all up to just to blast you out of the sky, right?” Jariah asked. “Right?”

“Kark if I could ever figure that witch,” Cade muttered.

That was hardly reassuring. As *Mynock* reoriented to circle around the planet’s outer orbit, Jao asked, “What’s your history with Maladi? You said she might want payback for what you did to her on Wayland.”

Deliah made a low grunt, like someone struck by unhappy memory. Cade said, “Couple years back, Maladi paid Rav to send us off to a trap on Wayland. She wanted to test her latest poison and tried it on Blue.”

“Why did she need you?”

“Because I’ve got this... I guess you can call it a gift.” Cade looked down at his gloved hand. “I can heal people. Only it ain’t the pretty kind of healing those temple Jedi like to do. Someone’s on the brink of death and I can pull them back, but I gotta go to the dark side to do it. I’ve gotta find the anger inside me and make the Force do something it doesn’t want to do. Maladi knew that. It was what Krayt was after me in the first place. So she wanted to see if she had a poison so good even I couldn’t heal it.”

“But you did.” Jao glanced at Deliah, who stared resolutely ahead like she was trying to ignore the conversation.

Cade, though, placed a hand on her head and stroked blue hair. “Only did it ‘cause I learned to draw on the light side to heal. Turns out I had love inside me, not just rage.”

This was a side of Skywalker Jao hadn’t seen before. He was surprised how it didn’t jar with the sides he had. “So Maladi wants you because you beat her poison? From what I’d heard, she wasn’t the type to keep grudges.”

“She wants me ‘cause I’ve got Skywalker blood, whatever good that’s supposed to do me. But back on Wayland... She also tried to reach into my mind. Feed me all my fears and push me to the limit. Well, she stirred up my dark side real strong, so I got into *her* mind too. I saw all she feared and messed with her head. I could tell she didn’t like what I showed her.” Cade stopped, like that was all.

“I don’t understand,” Jao said.

“Most people don’t like seeing how they are deep inside. Stang, I don’t. Maladi plays all cold, controlling Sith

mastermind of everything, but deep down she's a big tangled-up, paranoid mess that goes around making poisons and plots just to convince *herself* she's smarter than anybody else." He sighed. "Kind of pathetic, really."

Jaο wanted to ask more, but a beeping on the comm board interrupted them. Jariah said, "We've got a hail from one of the satellites."

"Tell me they're not going to start shooting," said Cade.

"No. They're landing coordinates."

"I guess Maladi's invitation was real." Deliah gripped the control yoke. "Do we head in?"

Cade squeezed her shoulder. "Yeah, take us down."

Marasiah's red royal shuttle sailed through the hangar mouth of the Gree vessel. Metal doors swung shut in their wake and she felt like they were being swallowed. The Gree apparently did not use atmospheric containment fields like the rest of the galaxy; once the heavy doors closed, the hangar roared with pumped-in air as the chamber repressurized.

"What kind of atmosphere are they using?" Sinde asked the shuttle's co-pilot.

The woman checked her sensors. "Oxygen-methane compound. It appears to be their native atmosphere."

"They're not going out of their way to be hospitable," Antares said. "That's a sign."

Marasiah agreed; she knew a negotiating tactic when she saw one. Her request had clearly touched the Gree the wrong way. Too bad, she thought; she was going to Te Hasa with their approval or without.

Marasiah, Antares, and Sinde affixed breath-filter masks to their faces before going down the landing ramp. C-3PO shuffled behind them, and though the droid's face was unmoving metal, he somehow seemed to emanate wonder as his head swung back and forth, taking in the alien ship.

A round doorway on the other side irised open. A trio of Gree moved into the room, propelled across the slick floor by their writhing tentacles. The rest of their bodies were draped in long robes, and their massive heads seemed to droop halfway down their backs. They had no mouths to

speak of, only folds of layered tissue at the bottom of their faces, and large all-black eyes in which she could see her curved reflection. Marasiah ruled a federation of a million species and her father had trained her from a young age to avoid prejudice against non-humans. Nonetheless, these Gree struck her as fundamentally strange. They were relics from an era eons past, when Force-mighty Celestials had constructed great and terrible wonders beyond modern sentients' ability to comprehend. That such relics should survive in the modern galaxy- her galaxy- disturbed her.

"I am Empress Marasiah Fel of the Galactic Federation," she told the Gree. "As you requested, my companions have come unarmed."

The nearest Gree, dressed in violet robes instead of the others' blue, raised two tentacles like arms and vocalized a series of squeals, hisses and clicks. A metallic voice chirped Basic from the translator device attached to its robe. "I am Administrator General Oratak'k."

"Are you authorized to grant us access to Te Hasa?"

The Gree vocalized again, and the translator said simply, "Foreigners are not permitted access to Te Hasa."

Marasiah glanced sideways at C-3PO, who tittered anxiously but had nothing to add. She told Oratak'k, "Foreigners are already on Te Hasa. I'm sure you know at least some of what's transpired in the larger galaxy over the past few years. The Sith cult that once ruled the galaxy is nearly vanquished, but one of their leaders, Lady Maladi, has found shelter in the Gree Enclave."

The Gree hissed and squealed and its tentacles writhed. The translator simply repeated, "Foreigners are not permitted access to Te Hasa."

"Foreigners *have* access to Te Hasa. I am not faulting your government. The triumvirate has no argument with you so long as you give us access to Darth Maladi immediately. I came here to avoid a conflict between our peoples, not start one."

Next Oratak'k's translator said, "Foreigners are not permitted access to Te Hasa. In suggesting otherwise you affront the veracity and competency of the Administrative Council."

"I meant no such thing." She decided to let mounting anger show. "As you can see, I have the force to conquer Te Hasa in an hour. Instead I chose to negotiate. I'm showing respect for your sovereignty."

"There are no foreigners on Te Hasa," Oratak'k said. "You will not be permitted."

Marasiah heard Antares growl beside her. C-3PO edged closer and said, "Excuse me, Majesty, but I believe the administrator general's translator device is not entirely accurate."

She looked to the droid and lowered her voice. "What do you mean?"

"The administrator's device told you 'there are no foreigners on Te Hasa.' However, according to my translation matrix, a more accurate Basic representative of Oratak'k's words are, 'we do not know of foreigners on Te Hasa.'"

That seemed to her a big difference. "Are you sure?"

"Oh, yes, Majesty. As you know, the Gree language operated a complex system of metaphors regarding color and geometry. Oratak'k said—"

She hadn't know that. "Are you *certain*?" she pressed.

"Oh, quite. It was an admission of ignorance and potentially embarrassing. Perhaps his translator is programmed to project assurance."

That was something Marasiah could use. She turned back to the Gree. "I accept that you are neither know or are responsible for Darth Maladi's presence on Te Hasa. However, I can assure you she *is* present. Therefore I propose a joint mission to find her, together. Our people will be supervised by yours at all times."

The suggestion seemed to take Oratak'k aback. The Gree's tentacles twisted anxiously and its translator said, "You have offered statements. We do not trust foreigner's words."

Marasiah glanced at C-3PO. The droid provided, "Oratak'k expressed the need for more tangible proof."

She'd thought as much. She told the Gree, "A ship launched from my destroyer has already arrived at Te Hasa. It breached the orbital defenses without being fired upon or bothered in any way. Darth Maladi requested that ship come

to her and she clearly arranged for it to have permission to land. Someone in authority on Te Hasa must be aligned with a foreign agent without your knowledge.” She raised an eyebrow. “I imagine *that* would displease your Administrative Council.”

The Gree hissed again and the translator said, “We require more than statement.”

Thankfully, she was prepared for this. “Antares,” she said, “Please show the administrator general the tracking data from the homing device we placed on *Mynock*.”

Antares took a slim datapad from the pouch at his waist, turned it on, and held it out. One of Oratak’k’s tentacles cautiously reached to take it. With wide unblinking eyes, the Gree took on the data on its screen, which contained full telemetry of *Mynock*’s descent through Te Hasa’s orbit and into its atmosphere, terminating only when the ship activated its jamming field after touch-down.

“From this information,” she said, “We can pinpoint exactly where Darth Maladi is on Te Hasa’s surface. All we need to do now is go there and apprehend her. We will work together, as a sign of mutual respect between our governments.”

Still clutching the datapad in its tentacle, Oratak’k hissed and clicked. The translator said, “Foreigners are not permitted access to Te Hasa. This infraction will end immediately.”

“Then we will go together.”

“Foreigners are not permitted access to Te Hasa. We will remove foreigners alone.”

Marasiah saw many ways that could go wrong. “Darth Maladi is a Sith Lord, an extremely dangerous enemy. We have experience battling Sith Lords. You do not. I am offering to *help* you remove the foreigners. After that you have my word, as empress, that we will leave your space and never bother you again.’

Oratak’k made softer hissing sounds, which its device did not translate. She looked to C-3PO, who said, “I believe Oratak’k is deep in thought.”

“It needs to understand that we have to go apprehend Maladi together.”

"Indeed. I believe it *does* understand. However, the Gree concept of face runs quite deep. In the interest of expediency, Majesty, may I say a few words?"

She regarded the droid carefully. "For what purpose?"

"I would like to remind him, in language I'm sure he'd understand, that we are not his enemy. The Sith are, and we've come offering help on a mutual problem."

"And you think you can say that better than I can?"

"With all due respect, Majesty, you can't say anything in Gree at all."

C-3PO had a point. She sensed Atares' disapproval but said, "A few words, Threepio."

The droid seemed proud as he shuffled forward, lifted his head, and began making noise. It was surreal hearing those hisses, squeals, and click coming out of Threepio's human-sounding face, but Oratak'k did not seem taken aback. The Gree's tentacles uncurled and it began replying in turn. Marasiah watched in quiet amazement as the conversation bounced back and forth between them. She could pick up nothing in that incomprehensible noise, no hint of how the conversation was going, but she could dimly sense Oratak'k in the Force, and its reluctance from a minute ago seemed to be waning.

Finally the conversation ended. C-3PO turned around and said, "I believe we have obtained permission to land one shuttle on Te Hasa."

"You believe?" Marasiah said. "Administrator General, can you please confirm that?"

Oratak'k squealed and raised an arm-tentacle. The translator on its collar said, "Foreigners will be permitted limited access to Te Hasa. One transport-vessel."

Marasiah felt relief fill her. "We understand. Thank you, Administrator General. We are grateful for your permission and eager to help."

"One transport-vessel," the Gree repeated. "And this one to accompany."

Marasiah understood. "Thank you. We will return to my flagship and prepare a shuttle as quickly as possible."

"This one is waiting."

The conversation seemed over. Marasiah spun and went back to her ship. Her Knights hurried ahead and she lagged slightly to stay with C-3PO. The droid could only move so fast.

"I'm grateful for your help," she admitted, and wondered what the full story of his old, strange machine was. "You're a very capable protocol droid."

"Thank you, Majesty. Did you know, your ancestor, Mistress Leia, thought very highly of my diplomatic skills. She once told me I could talk an angry gundark to sleep. I was quite flattered."

Marasiah allowed an amused smile as she ascended the ramp into her shuttle. The galaxy was full of strange wonders and ancient mysteries, and it was not always a bad thing.

Maladi's lair sat on a stretch of Te Hasa newly turned to daylight, and a crisp morning glow brought out the colors in the landscape: vast bleds of yellow sand, orange ridges, bright red outcroppings of bare rock jutting up as buttes and hoodoos. It was an alien landscape on an alien world, and Cade would have never come here if it weren't for his mother. He'd have left the empress to sort out all this Force-deafness and gone along this way, to hell with his Skywalker legacy. He was here to get Morrigan and get out.

That was what he had told himself all this while, but as *Mynock* neared the designated landing coordinates he admitted that he did care whether the Jedi went extinct. As much as it could be a pain in his butt, the Force was not something that deserved to be kept locked away in two vessels. It was a conduit to wisdom and power and grace and all the other nice things the Jedi went on about, and it was wrong that conduit had been stolen by some paranoid, overcompensating Sith. Without it, the galaxy would suffer.

So here he was, fulfilling his destiny again. Or something.

Deliah guided *Mynock* into a deep gash of a canyon carved by some long-dried river. She decelerated to maneuver through its mild turns until they spotted the grey jut of a landing pad attached to the red canyon wall.

"I guess that's our spot," she said, decreasing altitude and cutting thrusters.



“Can’t believe there’s any other hidden hideouts close by.” Cade moved his hands to his waist and felt the reassuring weight of his lightsaber and blaster pistol. “Any welcoming party?”

“Not that I can see,” Jariah said.

Cade didn’t see any either. The platform was easily big enough for three ships *Mynock*’s size and Deliah placed them down so their backup would have plenty of room to land. *Mynock* came to rest with its cockpit facing a round metal portal, maybe two meters high and two across. There was a larger door on the other end of the land pad, probably for cargo transfer. No droids were waiting for them, no tentacled cephalopods either.

“So what now?” asked Jao. “Do we just... walk in?”

“From here on, I don’t know any more than you. Let’s go back and get ready. Blue, Jariah, Artoo, get that jamming field up and keep it up.”

R2-D2 whistled affirmative and Cade and Jao stalked out of the cockpit, back to the crew lounge. Talon and Gunner were right where he’d left them, seated across the table from one another, the former with her wrists and feet bound, the latter with a rifle in her lap.

“Are we there?” asked Gunner.

“That’s right. Got instructions right where to go.”

“How considerate.”

“Yeah. I don’t expect Maladi’s graces last long once she realizes who I’ve brought with me.” Seriously he said, “There’s no telling what we’re gonna find inside. If you want to stay here, help Blue and Jariah guard the ship-”

“You know why I came.” Gunner got to her feet. “Let’s go get her.”

Cade had figured she’d say that. He slapped the breath mask dangling from his belt. “Okay. Grab one of these from the compartment by the airlock. There’s no telling how much breathable air we’re gonna have outside.”

“What about her?” Gunner waved her rifle at Talon, still sitting stoic.

“Grab another. I guess she’ll need to breath too.”

“I mean, are we really taking her with us?”

“Well I didn’t take her this far just to leave her in the ship.” To Talon he called, “Okay, stand up.”

Talon rose without a word. With a touch from the Force, Cade released the shackles around her ankles, allowing her to take two long steps forward. She held up her bound wrists, wordlessly imploring.

Cade wagged a finger. “If I need you free, I’ll set you free. But not yet.”

Talon knew better than to argue. Cade waved her forward and she went first in line to the door, then took the ramp to *Mynock’s* broad main hold, where Jao was waiting. He’d brought his lightsaber and blaster both, plus a small assortment of other tools hooked along his belt. Imperial Knights were supposed to be trained like soldiers, as good in a firefight as your best stormtrooper. Cade hoped that held true.

Cade tapped the controls that lowered *Mynock’s* landing ramp. As it groaned downward he tapped on the ship’s internal comm and hailed the cockpit. “How’s it going? We jamming?”

“We jamming,” Jariah replied, and R2-D2 whistled in the background.

“Good. We’re heading out now. Close that ramp when we’re gone and don’t open it again until we come out.”

“Really? I was gonna invite some Gree in for a party.”

“You’re hilarious, *pateesa*,” Cade said and shut off the comm. He hoped a lame joke wouldn’t be the last thing he shared with his friends.

Gunner and Talon went down the ramp first. Jao followed, then Cade. Everyone with free hands gripped a blaster as they surveyed the landing pad. There wasn’t much to see, just flat horizontal space held out over a deep chasm drop. It was still early in the morning and midday shadows hadn’t fallen inside the canyon itself; when Cade stepped to the platform edge and peered over he saw red stone walls fall down into black.

“This place is clear,” Gunner called. She’d walked Talon closer to the round entry portal.

As Cade and Jao went to join them the door slid open. The alien that came through could have only been a Gree. It

glided smoothly on the aggregate motion of its tentacles across the platform, and its huge black eyes surveyed the newcomers. There was no expression on its face that Cade could read and he wasn't getting much through the Force either.

It made a series of squealing noises and waved two arm-tentacles in circles. Then a voice emanated from the translation device hooked to the collar of its robe, saying, "Too many visitors. You have brought more than the Lady proscribed."

"Since when did Maladi turn down live test subjects?" Cade replied, hands on hips. "Tell her I've brought all she could want- an Imp Knight, a Sith, and *me*."

The Gree squealed again. "What of the other gold human?"

"She's here to keep us all in line. And to get Morrigan Corde out of here. This is a prisoner exchange, right? Three Force-users, or *ex-Force*-users, for one woman. That's not a bad deal, right?"

The Gree made a lower gurgling sound, and its translator relayed nothing. Trying to keep patient, Cade muttered under his breath, "I can't believe it, but I really wish Threepio was here."

Then, without another word, the alien slithered back through the door, and it closed shut behind him.

Gunner scowled, "Great. Do you have a contingency plan in case she won't let us in?"

"Yeah, it's called a lightsaber. Don't worry. Maladi'll be willing to negotiate. They haven't shot at us."

"Yet," Jao said.

"He is right," Talon said, reluctantly. "Lady Maladi will see the value of exchanging three prisoners for one. She was always most... practical."

"Well, if she *does* take the bait, what happens then?" asked Jao.

Gunner said, "I take our mother back to *Mynock*, then sit tight and hope backup arrives. Not that I expect that Sith to keep her word."

"It is... unlikely," Talon admitted.

The portal opened once more. The Gree emerged and said, "Your offer has been approved. Please follow."

Jao looked surprised. Gunner looked cautious. Talon stepped straight ahead, hands still clasped in front of her, and followed the Gree into the facility.

Cade followed her into the hallway. Gunner and Jao fell in behind him. The Gree led them down a long corridor with walls of rough-hewn stone. As they walked Cade unhooked his breath mask and inhaled. It smelled like sweet standard oxygen, probably sustained for Darth Maladi's benefit. They continued through the hallway and passed through a door, into a room where tall glass containers lined the walls. Some were cracked open, some intact but empty, and a few contained twisted bodies floating in sickly greenish liquid. Cade couldn't tell what life-forms they'd been originally but he couldn't bring himself to look closely either. Through their muffled Force-presence he felt sickened revulsion from Jao and Gunner, even from Talon.

The next chamber immediately made Cade sorry he'd taken off the mask. The air reeked of chemical preservatives vainly fighting physical decay. Glass-walled cages gave him an excellent view of what remained of long-dead prisoners. Some of the bodies, variously animal and sentient, looked absolutely desiccated in their containers. Maladi might have been hiding out here for the past two years, but someone had been doing experiments for way longer than that.

The Gree let them into the chamber beyond. The stench dulled without going away as Cade and his companions stepped onto to top of what seemed to be a corkscrewing walkway, running down the sides of a tall, cylindrical stone-walled chamber. He went to the railing, peered down fifteen meters to the bottom, and saw his mother seated atop a rectangular operating table. Her blond head was tilted up, and across the distance their eyes met.

The Gree positioned itself to block their descent. Cade growled, "Let me down so I can see her."

"You, pass," the Gree rolled a tentacle at him. "The others, stay."

Gunner growled and gripped her weapon tighter. Cade held out a hand. "Fine. They can watch from up here. Let me pass."

The Gree shifted aside, allowing Cade space to descend. He stalked down the corkscrew without looking back, keeping one hand on his blaster and the other on the hilt of his lightsaber. He circled all the way to the bottom of the chamber and found his mother still seated on the table, held there by a metal cuff around her hand. He instinctively reached out with the Force to unlock it.

“Stop,” a voice said, right in his ear.

Cade jerked sideways and spun on Maladi. She was like the woman he’d known but different; her hair was down in messy curtains on either side of her face, and her eyes were dark brown. She wore the same black, sleeveless dress, though, and kept her hands politely folded in front of her.

“Very good, Rakat’l,” Maladi called upward. “Keep them there while Skywalker and I converse.”

Cade edged toward Morrigan. “Let my mother go.”

Maladi shook her head. “Not yet.”

“What, are we gonna wait until you cut me open, soak up my midi-chlorians?”

“Oh, Cade Skywalker, you never understood,” Maladi shook her head, but she smiled. It was a wide, toothy smile, unlike anything he’d seen from her, and it sent shivers down his spine.

“What don’t I understand?”

“I’ve brought you here to *thank* you, Cade. You inspired me to give my gift to the galaxy. And soon, I’ll share it with you too.”

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

When she'd first seen them peering at her from the top of the chamber, Morrigan had thought them a hallucination. She'd been expecting to see Cade, but then Gunner's face had joined his in looking down from above. They'd been joined, impossibly, by Darth Talon's, and then a dark male face she didn't recognize. Even when Cade came down the walkway and stood on the grated floor in front of her, she wasn't sure if this was real.

That solution Maladi injected her with hadn't been a placebo. Morrigan had been fighting nausea for hours; and a retching pain had been building in her stomach. Her skin burned; her eyes itched in their sockets. The room seemed to spin around her and it took effort to sit upright.

Smiling, sounding almost giddy, Darth Maladi told her son, "I've brought you here to *thank* you, Cade. You inspired me to give my gift to the galaxy. And soon, I'll share it with you too."

Cade- and it was really, truly her son- stood firm where he was. One hand was on his holstered blaster, the other on his lightsaber, but he didn't use them. Keeping cautious eyes on Maladi he asked, "You okay, mom?"

Morrigan opened her dry mouth and rasped, "No."

"I injected her with a poison." Maladi idly twirled hair around her forefinger. "She still has a few hours left, but they won't be pleasant. I can give her a delaying agent that will last her, oh, twelve more hours."

Suddenly Cade's lightsaber was in his hand, his arm was stretched out, and a green-white blade-tip buzzed an inch from Maladi's neck. "Give it to her," Cade said, quiet and firm.

Maladi didn't flinch, didn't even blink. "Kill me and you kill your mother. You know that. Besides, I'm not afraid of death."

"I can do a lot worse than kill you."

"True," Maladi admitted. Carefully she reached up with one hand and tugged the collar of her dress low. Though her vision was starting to lose focus, Morrigan saw the glint of metal above her breast and the slow pulse of a single light.

"What the hell is that?" Cade grunted. The tip of his lightsaber edged back.

"A heartrate monitor," Maladi said, then stamped the grate beneath her feet. "I've installed a baradium bomb fifty meters below. If my heartbeat stops, or stays too fast for too long, it will trigger detonation. Everything and everyone in this facility will be atomized."

Cade's face twisted in frustration. He asked his mother, "Is she for real?"

Weakly Morrigan said, "I... I don't know."

It seemed like something Maladi would do. Cade had brought three unexpected allies with him, and likely had more on the way, but the Sith witch had made sure she was firmly in control of the situation.

Cade realized that too. He lowered his lightsaber without shutting it off, and Maladi smiled in satisfaction. Pulling her collar back up she asked, "Do you understand why I brought you here?"

"No. And I'm not gonna let you enlighten me until you give her the delaying agent."

Maladi opened her mouth to argue, but no sound came. Her jaw hung open and her throat strained for air. Morrigan didn't see her son's other hand clenched to squeeze, but she knew what he was doing. On his face there was no killing anger, just grim intent.

"Cade, don't!" Morrigan panted.

From higher above, Gunner shouted, "Damn it, Skywalker!"

"I ain't gonna break her throat," Cade told them, "But I can keep squeezing. How long's it gonna take for your head to start swimming?"

Maladi choked, "The bomb... you fool..."

"We can go back to the safe zone any time you want, *cheeka*."

"Please... I will... do it..."

"That's better." Cade released her throat. "Give it to her now."

Maladi bent at the waist and retched for air. A minute ago she'd seemed in total control; now Cade seemed to have taken in back. In reality Maladi's baradium bomb was the final card any of them could play, but Cade had at least succeeded in scaring her confidence away.

Panting, stroking her throat, Maladi said, "I'd forgotten.... what kind of man you are."

Cade spared her a snide reply. Maladi stepped to one of her side tables, plucked a syringe from a tray, and walked it over to Morrigan. The liquid inside was colorless and translucent like the previous injections of delaying agent. That didn't mean Morrigan was safe, but without the injection she'd be delirious in minutes. She barely felt the needle enter her arm. When Maladi stepped back she exhaled, slumped, and closed her eyes. After ten or twenty heartbeats, the nausea that had gripped her start to recede. She still felt sick, but no longer on the point of vomiting.

"Mom?" Cade asked. "Mom, are you okay?"

His earnest worry touched her heart. "I'm... okay. Is Gunn... up there?"

"Yeah. We brought Talon too. I figured, why not?" Cade stepped purposely to Maladi, lifting his blade close to her neck. "Now, *cheeka*, I'll let you do your rant."

A compact cluster of bright ion engines slipped out from beneath the *Jagged Fel*'s white hull and accelerated toward the Te Hasa's distant, tiny disc. At the same time the ovoid Gree vessel, about the same size the departing Imperial assault shuttle, took up the same vector. Its solar sail folded elegantly as its mast reeled it in, and both craft prepared for a lightspeed micro-jump into the planet's orbit. Soon the



translucent material vanished from sight. The assault shuttle flared and disappeared into hyperspace, and a moment later, without any flash or visible show of propulsion, the strange Gree vessel winked out of existence as well.

Marasiah had watched it all from the bridge of the *Jagged Fel*. The plan was simple: the two small ships would decant from hyperspace over Te Hasa and dive into the planet's atmosphere, where they'd land at the site of Darth Maladi's laboratory. The star destroyer itself would keep a respectful distance from the planet, edging only close enough for Marasiah to reach out to her distant cousin in the Force and alert Cade Skywalker that help was imminent.

She ached to go with them on the assault shuttle, but Antares and Treis had both insisted that she remain here. There were no telling what traps or dangers were inside Maladi's lair. As empress and fulcrum of the galaxy's unified government, her life was too important to risk. If the worst happened, the last two certain Force-users could be lost forever.

They were right about everything, and she hated it, but she couldn't deny their logic. In her stead, Antares and Treis had piled into the assault shuttle along with her most elite stormtrooper unit. Both of the old Jedi had joined, and they'd taken the Sith apprentice with them. Apparently K'Kruhk thought he'd be able to keep the young man under control.

Most surprisingly, Ania Solo had insisted on coming. She'd shown at the last minute, flippantly claiming that she was getting bored waiting around. Marasiah thought she understood the real reason.

And now all of them were gone. Standing at the fore of the bridge, Marasiah held herself straight. A leader had to be seen to be strong. That was one piece of her father's advice she'd never doubted. Even as she projected sureness, she felt helpless and alone. For all her authority and the Force-power she still wielded, what happened next was out of her hands. It was a terrible feeling.

She heard the shuffle of metal feet and the creaking of servos as C-3PO came up from behind her. Not looking away from the viewport she asked, "Is something the matter, See-Threepio?"

“Not at this time, Majesty.” She droid stopped beside her. He stared ahead, seemingly watching the stars with the same longing as her. “However, you needn’t worry. I’m quite certain the mission will be successful.”

It wasn’t like a droid to offer unsolicited assurance. “Are you?”

“Oh, yes. It has been placed in very capable hands.” After a pause, C-3PO added, “Artoo-Detoo is a most exemplary automaton in many ways. His skill set far exceeds that of other astromech droids, and he is most resourceful.” After another pause he said, “Please don’t tell him I said so. For all his virtues, Artoo’s ego can be a frightful thing.”

Marasiah smiled faintly. “I’ll keep your secret.”

“Thank you, Majesty. However, I believe our greatest asset Te Hasa will be Oratak’k.”

That took her by surprise; the alien administrator was inscrutable, and she’d never trusted what she couldn’t understand. “In what way?”

“Did I not explain? During our conversation, it explained that under Gree law, unauthorized association with foreigners is punishable by up to five centuries of-” A burst of unintelligible Gree noises escaped his vocoder. “This is a most unpleasant form of torture. Oratak’k plans to offer clemency to Lady Maladi’s associates as long as they cooperate. It believes they will surrender quickly to avoid-” He made the same untranslatable noises, then added, “Oratak’k is quite a reasonable fellow, actually.”

“That’s good to know,” she said honestly, but it didn’t to soothe her. Nothing could, when the fate of everything was out of her hands.

Though Cade held his blade close to her neck, Maladi seemed unphased. Given the baradium bomb she had armed and prepped under their feet, she had every reason to be. The witch had made certain she would be in control of this situation, and despite Cade’s threats and bluster he couldn’t change that fact. Maladi tilted her head back, allowing glow from the buzzing saber to paint the underside of her chin green-white.

The Sith- *former* Sith- stared at the rising spiral of the walkway above them and whispered, “Do you know what this place is, Cade?”

“Some Sith house of horrors,” he grunted. “Bet it’s been here longer than you.”

“More than three hundred years,” she nodded eagerly. “This was Darth Acheron’s place.”

“That name supposed to mean something?”

“Acheron was master to Tenebrous, who was master to Plagueis, who was master to Sidious.”

Cade’s eyes narrowed at the last one. “And what’s that gotta do with anything?”

“Acheron was brilliant. He made allies of the Gree, allies who passed their allegiance through generations, on to me. He developed a virus that targeted midi-chlorians, destroyed them, and in doing it rent the bodies of the host.”

“Sounds like the perfect Jedi-killing bug.”

“No. Because it targeted *all* midi-chlorians. Jedi, Sith, everyone. So it was never deployed.”

“But you fixed it up, tweaked it so it’s non-lethal, and turned it into your Force-killing plague. I get the how. I still don’t get the why.”

“The why is *you*, Cade. You opened my eyes.”

He’d been afraid somehow this would all end up being his fault. He tried to shield the sting with sarcasm. “They look different from the last time I saw ‘em.”

“Yes. On Wayland. You reached into my mind and showed me my fear. You showed me *myself*. Always I told myself I was working for Lord Krayt’s design and the good of the One Sith... To bring order and justice to the galaxy... But that was wrong. The Jedi were never my enemy. Not the Alliance, not Roan Fel, not your mother. My enemy was the *Force*.”

“You lost me.”

“I spent a lifetime trying to be controller of all. I mastered spies and bred diseases. I despoiled your father’s Ossus Project. As my last service to Lord Krayt, I corrupted Roan Fel from within and drowned him in his inner darkness.” She tapped a fist against her breast. “But always the Force outwitted me. No matter what I did the Force would not give

me what I wanted. Never, never, never. It was always ahead of me, and I tangled my soul trying to fight a battle I couldn't win."

"So 'cause you got all tangled inside, you took the Force away from everyone?"

"It was for *all* of us, Cade. Sith, Jedi, Imperial Knights, we are all tortured by the Force. It whispers fragments of truth in our ears, promising enlightenment that will never come. It leads us on to promised destinies then forces us to shoulder unbearable burdens. It taunts us with the illusion of being all-powerful, only to bring death and ruin on our heads. Even those who obey it selflessly are crushed by its demands. You know I'm right."

Her litany of complaints echoed the ones he'd nursed in his heart for many years. There was still truth in them; he only had to think of his father to feel bitterness that would never go away.

"The Force is more than that," Cade said. "A lot more."

"*Exactly*," Maladi hissed. "It's truth that will never be revealed. Power that will never share. Promises that are never kept. It taunts us, teases us, and *uses* toward ends that always defy our own. We twist ourselves trying to appease it. We enslave ourselves by serving or fighting its phantom will. All the while we become addicted to it. We let ourselves be lost in pursuit of its power. I have *liberated* us all. With the Force gone all of us- Jedi, Sith, everyone- can discover who we are *truly* meant to be."

This was striking close to home. Cade shielded again. "That's a lot of projecting you're doing, *cheeka*."

"We are all the Force's pawns and I am *sick* of being a pawn!" Maladi's hands balled to fists.

"So you decided to do something about it."

"It has been done before, and not be me. Your mother knows. I told her."

Cade glanced sidelong at his mother. Morrigan's face was still pale, her eyes still haggard, but there was new alertness in them. "She told me about... the past. The Gree, the Rakata, the other ancient races."

Confused, he looked back to Maladi. "What's that got to do with anything?"

"Once, eons ago, all the sentients in his galaxy could touch the Force. Gradually, it has withdrawn to fewer and fewer beings. Now there are only two left... thanks to me."

At least three, Cade hoped. "What do you mean, everyone could touch the Force? Where'd you get that?"

"The Gree archives. It is all there. For the past three centuries, Darth Acheron's servants have been translating them into Basic. In the level above here there's an entire archive of knowledge, tens of millennia old..."

"Legends," he muttered.

"No. I know they're true. In my heart. It was a plague like mine that stripped the Rakata of the Force. The Gree also lost their powers. The Force has been withdrawing itself for a long, long time... and I've finished the job."

"No, you didn't," Cade snarled. Maladi's crazy rantings were really starting to rile him now. The woman had robbed thousands of their powers and twisted the fate of the galaxy, all because she was *mad* at the Force. Cade had felt all those things and sulked for seven years; Maladi had done something far grander and far worse. "I didn't get infected by your damn virus. Neither does the empress, by the way, but I'm the one you called here."

"Exactly," Maladi clapped her hands together. "I knew, deep down, it would come to this. Not because my virus had a flaw. I tested it on dozens of live subjects, making sure it would sever but not kill, that it would lie dormant inside hosts long enough for it to spread widely. I knew it would work, that I could spread it as planned, that I could liberate the Jedi, Sith, Imperial Knights... But not the Skywalkers."

"How'd you know that?"

"Because the Force defeats our certainties," she growled, "Every time."

Maladi took a deep breath, unclenched her hands, and composed herself. Cade was sick of her rantings but intrigued against himself. She was mad but she was also a genius, and if these Gree archives she was talking about had any trustworthy information, it could predate even the Jedi's history of the Force.

More importantly, he had to keep her talking, keep stalling until Marasiah's backup arrived and captured the facility. An

ancient Sith hideout would have more for security than the one Gree he'd seen so far.

"Not that I ain't flattered," he told her, "But what made you think Skywalkers would spoil your *grancha* plan?"

She looked at him with those strange dark eyes and asked, calmly now, "Do you know what you are, Cade?"

He went for flippant again. "Jedi, son, lover, fighter. Take your pick."

"You are... a vergence in the Force. The descendent of the Chosen One himself."

"I've heard that story. Anakin Skywalker might have been the Chosen One but his life was nobody's idea of a good time. Besides, he's been dead for over a hundred years."

"But you carry his legacy inside you. You have a piece of him. So does the empress."

"He was a special guy, but he was still just a man."

"No," Maladi shook her head adamantly. "He was born *by* the Force, conceived by its will in the belly of a slave woman."

Cade fought a grimace. He'd heard stories, passed down through generations and blurred by time. His father had told him that, supposedly, Anakin Skywalker had been born from no father. Cade had never believed it, but then, there was a lot of things he'd refused to believe about the Force that ended up true.

"Millennia ago," Maladi went on, "The Jedi started a prophecy of a Chosen One who'd arise in time of darkness and rebalance the force. The time of darkness began with Darth Acheron himself. I found the histories here, in this very room. Through blood and toil, Acheron affected the Force, darkening it, making it easier for the Sith to bend it to their will. His apprentice's apprentice, Plagueis, sought to take things deeper. He dreamed of controlling midi-chlorians themselves, and with them controlling life and death. He and Sidious tipped the Force further to darkness, so far Plagueis could snuff out live midi-chlorians with his will alone. Next he tried to compel the midi-chlorians to multiply and create life itself from nothing!"

Her voice had gone lusty, but she stopped for breath. "Plagueis and Sidious overplayed. The Force sensed their

manipulations and denied them their Sith-made life. Instead it created a life of its own. Anakin Skywalker.” Sick laughter rattled in her throat. “The most powerful Sith goaded the Force into making their worst enemy. Its power can never be beaten, never. Is it any wonder I freed us from it?”

It sounded like madness, but like most of what Maladi had been telling him, it left Cade unsettled the way only hard truths could. “Doesn’t sound like the Force made a good move to me. Anakin spent half his life being Darth Vader, Sidious’ top stooge.”

“Exactly,” Maladi hissed. “The Force made a weapon it could not control! Yet that is how it chose to intercede on our mortal plane. The will of the Force is confounding. You know that. We both know that. Sidious realized what Anakin was early on and manipulated him, groomed him for over a decade, stole him from the Force and bent him to the darkness. But in the end the Force chose right. Vader regained Anakin and Anakin killed Sidious, ending Bane’s Sith forever and healing the darkness their kind had inflicted on the Force. And more, Skywalker sowed seeds. Down the generations, all the way to you and the empress, the Skywalkers have carried the power of your progenitor locked inside.”

“The power to do what?”

“To keep the Force in balance. To work its will. To touch and feel it, maybe even *command* it, in a way others can only envy. The Force *created* you, Skywalker. To make you it reached into the mortal plane in a way it never has, not in all the recorded history of the Jedi or Sith. That is how I knew it would defy me. Even now you’re the Force’s instrument, fighting back as I try to liberate us all.”

After listening to it all Cade thought he understood best he could ever understand. “So that’s why you need me. You’re gonna take slices off me and fiddle with my midi-chlorians until you figure out how to shut out all the Force forever.”

“Exactly,” Maladi’s head bobbed. “Only then can we *all* be free. From the Force, from ourselves.”

“Is that what you are? Free?”

She drew herself straight, gathered dignity, and said, “I am very near.”

“Okay. And once you figure out how to silence my midichlorians, make me and the empress deaf as the rest, then what? What happens to you without the Force? What happens to any of us?”

Her face relaxed into a fond, sly smile. “What happens to the others, the countless trillions who’ve always lived with silence? One moment after the next, they choose their own paths.”

“*Cheeka*, I’ve seen a lot of the galaxy. Most people are always answering to somebody, and even when they’re free to choose their paths they usually pick the wrong one.”

“But it will be *their* choice. And they will always be masters of their deepest selves.” She tapped her heart again. “You know this is true. For all the years you ran from your destiny, all the time I chased you, you wanted freedom. I can give that to you, permanently. With the agony of silence comes the joy of rebirth. I can give that to you, Cade.”

He’d wanted that, once, but even in his darkest days he’d never have accepted Maladi’s offer. Though he’d buried it beneath layers of anger and cynicism, he’d never fully rejected his father’s vision of a righteous galaxy, harmonized with the Force. It had been a lonely jewel too precious to break or throw away.

Cade opened his mouth for another frank reply, but he realized someone was faintly touching him in the Force. It could only be Marasiah, announcing that help was coming soon.

He’d have to be ready to disable Maladi when the moment arrived. The baradium bomb connected to her heart rate monitor threw everything into uncertain danger. A simple stun bolt might take her down, but it might trigger the bomb. He might be able to pin her limbs with the Force and restrain her until Marasiah’s techs arrived and figured how to defuse the warhead, but she might still have a way to trigger the explosion. He had no doubt Maladi would rather die than let anyone undo the black miracle of her virus.

There was no good choice, but he’d have to make one fast.

It wasn’t the first time Ania had been packed in with a shipful of Imperial stormtroopers, and while things had



worked out pretty well at the Battle of the Floating World, it wasn't an experience she enjoyed. She'd insisted Sauk, Kyra, and AG-37 stay on the star destroyer, but as the shuttle trembled through atmospheric entry and she got halfway crushed between big white-armored bodies, she wished she'd at least brought the assassin droid along.

Strapped tight back in the shuttle's troop section, Ania couldn't see anything of what was going on outside, but she felt their flight level out, then dip low again, felt them move from side to side as though maneuvering through a tight space.

Finally, she heard the sound of engines soften and repulsors hum to life. The soldiers packed into the ship noticed too, and they began to stir in anticipation. Ania leaned forward in her crash webbing and glanced toward the aft of the shuttle and the blast doors through which they'd deploy. The two Jedi and one Sith were closest, and she was surprised to see the young man's hands weren't bound. She didn't know what good any of them would be here, but then, she didn't know how much good *she* could do either. She only knew that she needed to be here, to help Jao however she could.

Metal scraped beneath them, signifying that they'd come in to land. Though the troopers were clearly ready to go, none unstrapped from their restraints, and a voice said over the intercom, "All troops, prepare to deploy when doors open. Do not, repeat do *not* enter the facility unless given go-ahead by the Gree. Secure the landing pad only."

When the rear blast doors opened, the three ex-Force-users went out first. The stormies popped out of their crash webbing quickly and surged for the exit. Ania gripped her blaster rifle tight and allowed herself to be pulled with their flow. The white-armored soldiers had breathing filters built into their masks, but Ania had to strap one to the bottom of her face as she was pushed out into the methane-rich atmosphere.

The landing pad was a broad flat disc jutting out from the side of a great, red-walled canyon. It was packed tight with ships and swarming with people; the Imperial assault shuttle had dropped down in the center, with an ovoid Gree ship on one side and *Mynock's* familiar red body on the other. A

small herd of aliens were congregated around a semicircular portal built into the cliff wall. They looked like clusters of tentacles half-covered in robes, topped by heads that seemed to spill off their shoulders. Gree, no doubt, and they seemed to be announcing their presence in their incomprehensible language.

The stormtroopers formed ranks behind the friendly Gree and the former Force-users- Jedi, Sith, Imperial Knights- anxiously gathered on the platform. Ania spotted Jariah and Deliah standing at *Mynock's* base and rushed toward them.

"Glad you could make it," Jariah called as she trotted up to them. He and Deliah both cradled rifles and watched the front door anxiously.

"Any word from inside?" asked Ania.

"Not yet," Deliah shook her head. The Zeltron's face was pinched into a tight, concerned scowl. Ania could tell she didn't give a damn about anything else inside that secret Sith base except for Cade.

The Gree continued to hiss, squeal, gargle, and click their demands. They didn't seem to be getting anywhere until the portal opened and a trio of new Gree slid outside on writhing tentacles. They started talking back and while Ania had absolutely no idea what was being said, each had raised a pair of tentacles like arms above its head, which looked to her like the universal sign of surrender.

Ania didn't pick up any official signal to move in, but the stormtroopers started for the door and the Gree let them pass. "Guess that's our go sign," she muttered and jogged in to join them, Jariah and Deliah right behind her.

Cade stood, tense with indecision, a blaster in one hand and humming lightsaber held low in the other. Maladi watched him with dark careful eyes and asked, "Well, Skywalker? Do you want to be free?"

He glanced at his mother, then at the audience who'd watched it all from the top of the chamber. He had two choices: stall her until Marasiah's people were on her doorstep, or try and disable her now and risk the baradium bomb explosion before more people got within blast range. Both were suicidally risky.

He could try and give the others a head start. He told Maladi, "Sure, go ahead. Take my midi-chlorians. Just let Morrigan Corde go."

Maladi looked sidelong at Cade's mother. "He cares for you. Why is that, Corde-Calixte? You schemer, all twisted inside. You who only care for power and knowledge... Why should he care for you?"

Morrigan was still dazed from the poison inside her, and Maladi's question seemed to have honestly struck her. She said, "I don't know. But maybe it's because I can change *without* wrecking the whole galaxy in the process."

"Then you're free of yourself, Calixte-Corde?" Maladi sounded like she really wanted to know.

Morrigan swallowed. Cade watched her every motion; at that moment he cared about nothing else. Very weakly she said, "I hope so."

"Very well," Maladi said. "Cut her loose."

Cade sidestepped. With a flick of his lightsaber, he sliced the cuff binding Morrigan to the table. Then he tilted the blade back toward Maladi. "Give us the antidote."

"There is no antidote."

"The delaying agent. Every bit of it you've got."

"It will not save her."

"Shut up and *get* it."

Maladi sighed, as though all this had gotten tiresome. As she stepped across the grate to one a stout refrigeration unit in the corner of the lab, Cade called on the Force to gently lift his mother off the table and place her on her feet. He stepped close and asked, "You okay?"

Unsteady, Morrigan gripped his arm with both hands. "Cade, this won't work."

"It's working okay so far." Better than he'd expected, actually.

"You can't let Maladi analyze your midi-chlorians. She might be able to—"

From above, the Gree guarding Jao, Talon, and Gunner released a series of frantic noises. Cade didn't have a clue what they meant, but he could guess from the slack shock of Maladi's face.

Standing in front of the open refrigeration unit, Maladi stared upward and said, “What? They’re *inside*? Why aren’t you *stopping* them?”

The Gree responded with more incompressible sounds. Suddenly the door at the top of the chamber opened. White-armored stormtroopers surged into the room, pushing the Gree to the side as it flailed its tentacles up in surrender. Gunner joined them in running down the corkscrew, Talon disappeared from view, and Ania, Jariah, and Deliah all appeared around Jao at the top of the spiral.

It all happened at once, and shock delayed Cade’s reaction for the critical second. He swung his attention back to Maladi and reached out with the Force to seize her limbs, but he was too late. Her old lightsaber had appeared in her hand, emitter nozzle placed against her sternum. Before he could freeze her thumb it pressed down on the button, and she speared her body through with fatal light.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

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There was no telling how large the inside of this underground laboratory was, and the stormtroopers of the empress' elite division spread through its corridors as they sought Darth Maladi. Without the Force to guide them there was no telling where their quarry lay, and Eli and the Jedi found themselves pulled with the flow down one branch in the hallways. Neither Gree nor automated defenses arose to stop them, and Eli was surprised they were progressing so easily. The stormtroopers guided them down a passage walled by bare red rock, then through a door into a chamber filled with large glass capsules, some broken, others intact and filled with sickly fluid and twisted flesh.

The troopers pressed through the nearest door to their right. Eli immediately recognized it as a library. High walls were lined with shelves, themselves littered with folded parchments, bound books, scrolls, and storage devices he didn't recognize. It took the troopers only a few seconds to determine this room was both a dead-end and free of hostiles. They quickly spun around and exited to continue the search for Maladi, but Eli, K'Kruhk, and Lowbacca lingered among the volumes.

"What is this place?" Eli asked, though he already had some idea. Some of the piled tomes looked absolutely ancient. These documents could contain knowledge from the earliest history of the Sith or older, if they were of Gree origin.

K’Kruhk looked over the nearest set of parchments and nodded confirmation. “These are written in no language I recognize. I believe it is an old Gree tongue...”

Eli did not understand Lowbacca’s roar, but the Wookiee sounded impressed. Eli was too; he spun on one heel, taking in the centuries or millennia of knowledge piled up in this room. His head swam to think of the power they might unlock.

“Is it all in Gree?” he asked. “There have to be translations somewhere...”

Lowbacca roared again and waved a shaggy arm at once shelf. Eli saw a sealed container an arm long, went to it, and opened the lid. Datacards, hundreds of them, all lined up in tight rows. He pulled out the first and saw an alpha-numeric indexing label slapped on one side.

“Translations,” he said, and cradled the box against his chest. The wisdom here might contain anything, even the secret to regaining the Force.

Before either of the Jedi could step in and pry it from his untrustworthy hands, a stormtrooper darted back inside the room.

“Masters Jedi,” the soldier announced, “We’ve found her. Follow me!”

The stormtroopers followed. Lowbacca and K’Kruhk hurried in his wake. Eli stood there for a second in the empty room, cradling treasures beyond his imagining. Once Maladi was captured or killed, the Jedi would surely come back looking for this knowledge. Eli put the box back on the shelf but grabbed fists of datacards. He stuffed them into the pockets of his trousers, as many as he could fit, then went back into the laboratory.

Maladi’s lightsaber plunged into her chest just inches from its center. Her face wrenched in pain as the blade angled through her back. As she tried to nudge it upward, cleave through her heart and trigger the baradium bomb lodged beneath them, Cade grabbed both her hands in a firm invisible Force-grip. Her face strained as she realized what was happening, and her eyes met his from across the room.

Her rictus of pain turned into a smile; she knew that she'd already won.

Maladi was seconds away from dying. Her lightsaber shut down and rolled from hands too weak to grip, and then legs too weak to stand collapsed beneath her. Cade bounded toward her as she pitched onto the floor. He lunged, caught her with both arms as she fell, and they hit the grate together. He tried to lift her up, and their heads tilted close enough to kiss.

"You... never have... my knowledge..." Maladi creaked through bared teeth. "Never undo... what I've done..."

People were crowding around them; maybe Gunner and their mother, maybe stormtroopers or someone else. Cade didn't pay attention. He was already reaching into himself and calling on the power of dark healing he'd sworn never to use again. It was frighteningly easy to summon. If Maladi died here the baradium bomb would kill him, his mother and half-sister, Jariah and Deliah and other people he cared about. Even worse, it would vaporize Maladi's research, without which it could be impossible to undo the damage she'd wrought. All because Cade had been a second too slow in stopping her.

It he failed now, it would be the end of everything. Cade used the frustration boiling inside him to pull the power outward. Blue lightning sparked from his palms and dances across Maladi's wilting body, but even as he tried to mend the tears in her flesh he knew he simply didn't have the power. The tissue of her lungs was torn, the very walls of her heart scorched. It was all he could do to command the blood to pump through her veins.

There had always been limits to his healing. When he'd saved Deliah on Wayland that had been different; he'd cured her poisoned body on a molecular level by drawing on the light side of the Force, fueled by his love for her. He had none of that for Maladi and he could only use the dark side.

Cade looked up through blue corona enveloping their bodies. Gunner and Morrigan were there, staring down at him in shock. Stormtroopers stood behind him, half-filling the floor. He shouted, "Go! Get out of here! *Now*, damn it!"

Gunner didn't freeze under pressure. She spun on the stormtroopers and shouted, "Do it! Evacuate the facility! That's an order!"

"I don't know how long I can keep her alive..." Cade ground his teeth. "Mom... go!"

"No," she kneeled in front of him. Her green eyes pierced him as she said, "If this lab blows I'll die in twelve hours anyway. We need to disarm the bomb."

He wished they'd stop talking, wished they'd let him concentrate. "How in the hell do you plan to do that?"

"She said its beneath us." Gunner stamped the grate. "Skywalker, your lightsaber."

"I'm busy now!"

"I'll get it." Morrigan reached forward and pulled it from his belt.

Still cradling Maladi, still desperately trying to keep her alive, Cade watched his mother scan the room, run to one side, and shove aside a cabinet to reveal the top of a ladder leading down beneath the grate. Gripping the lightsaber in two hands, Morrigan turned it on and cut a hole through the grate big enough to fit through. She shut it off, leaned over, and powered down.

"I think I see it!" Morrigan called. "It's twenty, thirty meters down!"

"I'll go with you," Gunner said.

Morrigan shook her head and threw the lightsaber at her daughter. Gunner caught it against her chest. "I told you to go and this time you're *going*," Morrigan insisted.

They stared at each other across two meters' distance; then Gunner tossed something back to her mother: a small comlink. Then spun on the closest stormtrooper and said, "Where's your demo-man? Get him down here and send him after Agent Corde! Do it!"

As the stormtroopers relayed orders, Morrigan began to clamber down the ladder. Before her head ducked out of sight Cade called, "Mom! Wait!"

She froze there, and her face softened. "Take her out of here, Cade. *Go*."

Then she was gone. Cade wanted to climb down the ladder with her, wanted to tell her one last thing, he didn't know



what, but he felt Maladi's heart start to tear and renewed his desperate healing. Around him, the last of the stormtroopers were charging up the corkscrew walkway and out of the chamber, all except the one who was running to help Morrigan. A few figures lingered at the walkway's base, watching him: Gunner, Jariah, Deliah, even Ania and Jao.

With that kind of audience he couldn't just tell them to leave him behind.

Maladi whispered in his hear, too soft for the others to hear, "It's too late... Skywalker... end this... together."

"Not on your life," Cade growled, and as he poured savage will into Maladi he pushed to his feet. Cradling her in his arms, he staggered for the path that spiraled upward.

Morrigan descended the long ladder as fast as she could, all the while knowing the bomb beneath might blow at any second. She told herself she wouldn't even feel it if it went off; there's be just a split-second of atom-rending white, then nothing.

The red-walled shaft plunged even deeper beneath her, hundreds of meters. One slip of foot or hand and she was done. Each movement required concentration; though Maladi's delaying agent had calmed the poison in her blood, the symptoms still threatened her with nausea. Sometimes the world seemed to spin and she had to slow down, but she never stopped, not until she reached the bottom of the ladder and the grated platform that jutted out over the long drop.

She'd seen baradium warheads before, and this looked standard. The cylindrical capsule was about as long as her arm and wide in diameter as her head. Morrigan lay on her stomach, examined the weapon, and tried to remember how to disarm the damned thing. She marked the transmitter that corresponded to Maladi's pulse monitor and the battery capsule but cutting off either of those would almost certainly combust the warhead.

Two booted feet slammed hard on the grating, jarring her. A white-armored stormtrooper crouched beside her and said, "Please, Agent Corde, let me take a look."

Morrigan rolled to one side and watched him take out a utility knife and pry the bomb's casing apart. She'd brought

no knife herself, hadn't thought to. She'd charged down here heroically and stupidly because she'd wanted to give her children a chance to survive.

Not something Nyna Calixte would have done, not at all.

"This thing is wired to blow if we cut power to the transmitter, but I think I see a way around this." She could hear the stormtrooper chewing his lip as he talked. He sounded painfully young.

"What way?" she asked.

"Can you hold this, miss?" He handed her the knife and took something out of his equipment pouch. "I'm going to try and detach the battery without triggering the release."

"How?"

He pried apart a second layer of casing, revealing a tangle of wires connecting the bomb's baradium core to its charge device. Prying the tangle apart with both hands he said, "Miss, you're going to have to listen carefully and cut exactly where I say..."

When chaos broke loose in Maladi's lab, Talon knew exactly what she needed to do. She'd listened to everything Maladi and Cade had said in their long exchange. Some of it had shocked her. Some of it had explained what she'd always wondered, namely why Skywalker was so important and how he'd managed to defeat both Talon herself and Lord Krayt time and again.

When the stormtroopers had burst into the laboratory, she'd known in an instant what Maladi would do, and how Skywalker would react. The spymaster and poisoner whom Talon had known in Krayt's service would die before allowing her most grandiose scheme to be undone; her new madness, induced by whatever Skywalker had done to her on Wayland, did nothing to change that. Despite Maladi's claims, losing the Force had not liberated her; indeed, she seemed to have become twisted inside than ever.

Because she knew that Maladi would kill herself and trigger the bomb, and Skywalker would desperately try to keep her alive, Talon didn't wait to watch. When the stormtroopers charged in, shouting and waving their rifles Maladi's pet Gree, Talon used the confusion to reach low

and pluck Jao Assam's lightsaber from his belt without his noticing. Then she ducked low and scampered through the open door, into the passage full of glass cages and decaying dead. She heard feet approaching and ducked through the next door just as a half-dozen stormtroopers scampered past. She got lucky; none turned and tried to arrest her, though she knew more were coming.

Still clutching the lightsaber with her bound-together hands, Talon hurried through the chamber filled with broken and intact glass tanks. She caught the flail of brown Jedi robes just in time to duck behind one tank and watch through its pale green liquid as Lowbacca and K'Kruhk both marched past. She waited until they were gone and the room was empty to shift the lightsaber in her grip, tap the button for just a second, and use its pure-white blade to sever the bind holding her shackles together.

It had been twenty, thirty seconds since she'd left Maladi's laboratory. Each one was precious. There was no telling how long Skywalker would be able to keep Maladi alive for. Talon darted into the open and ran ahead, ready to cut down anyone who got her in her way. Even without the Force she could kill with a lightsaber.

Right as she got to the chamber's exit a side door hissed open. Talon pivoted, flicked the blade on and raised it to strike, but froze when she saw Eli in front of her, shackled hands raised as though to ward off a blow.

With an elegant flick of the wrist, Talon cut Eli's hands free as well.

"Hurry, apprentice," she said, "We must go! Now!"

"What happened?" he gasped.

There was no time to explain. Talon dashed through the exit and Eli followed her down a long straight hall walled by red stone. Stormtroopers and a few Gree clogged the hall on the far end, but when they saw the two Sith sprinting toward them the soldiers froze, confused. Some instinctively pressed against the wall, others the two Sith had to skirt around. Eli tripped and nearly fell on one trailing Gree tentacle but resumed his charge after Talon. No one raised a blaster to stop them. Talon knew they'd been lucky, and luck wouldn't last.

She counted forty-five seconds when they breached the hallway and went out onto the landing platform. Te Hasa's natural methane stench assailed them but they kept running fast across the mostly-empty pad. Talon aimed for the Imperial shuttle in the center, and again no one moved to stop them, not until Talon and Eli rounded to the entrance portal in the rear.

The stormtrooper guarding the closed portal jerked on sight of them and brought up his rifle. Talon lunged at the guard from the side, wedging the emitter-end of the lightsaber in his flank. She tapped the trigger, spearing through his side, and as his body went limp Eli pulled the blaster from his hands.

That had drawn attention, and Talon could hear more troopers coming around to investigate. Sixty seconds, she thought, and reached into the trooper's belt pouch where she knew his authorization card would be. More stormtroopers came from the right; Eli gunned down two in a volley of laserfire. Talon swiped the first trooper's card in the reader by the door. The portal to the assault shuttle opened.

Talon charged inside. Eli followed, pumping fire from the blaster with one hand while his other groped for the interior door controls. There were still four troopers inside the shuttle, but they were stunned and trapped in a confined space. Slow to react, with no place to run, the first two fell quickly to Talon's blade. The other two retreated down the cockpit as she advanced through the cabin but Eli fired over her shoulder and dropped them both with smoking helmets.

They clambered into the cockpit together. More stormtroopers had surrounded the shuttle, trying to force their way inside, but the kick of its repulsors and a wash of heat drove them back. With a jerk and shudder the shuttle began to rise off the platform, leaving the troopers and the two remaining ships to shrink below.

Ninety-five seconds, Talon thought as she kicked the engines on and pushed the shuttle toward the sky. Inertia pinned her to the back of her seat and for a second blackness clouded the edge of her vision; then they were pushing clear through clouds, leaving Te Hasa's surface behind them.

Eli, panting in the co-pilot's seat, turned wide eyes on Talon and asked, "What just happened?"

She ignored him and began preparing a jump to hyperspace. There would be plenty of time to explain on the long, long trip back to Saijo. Back to their comrades, who'd once been Sith.

"Damn!" the stormtrooper snapped.

Morrigan's heart stopped, then beat again. She still wasn't dead. "What?"

"It's not going to work." Fear made the young man's voice tremble. "The failsafes are too redundant. We can't detach the battery without triggering the bomb."

"Well what *can* we do?"

"I don't know. If we had the right equipment I'd try freezing the triggering mechanism. I don't have it, though. I don't *have* it..."

The man was about to have a breakdown as the inevitability of death crushed down on him. Morrigan, strangely, felt calm inside. She'd tried. She'd done what she could here and her greatest missteps seemed far away. Being arrogant enough to walk into Maladi's trap still stung, but the worst ones felt distant: thinking she could manipulate Maladi as she'd done Veed and Rulf, plotting and scheming to prove her greatness to herself, callously using loyal Imperial soldiers like this one. Believing the only worthwhile knowledge was the kind that gave power.

Giving up Cade and Kol, of course. That had been the start of everything wrong.

"M-maybe... Maybe we can try something else..." The stormtrooper was stuttering in his panic. "The comm unit. We can try detaching... No... That won't work..."

Morrigan softly asked, "What's your name, trooper?"

The soldier froze. Two heartbeats later he said, "Corporal Pritkiss, Second Company, Eight-Ninth Regiment-"

"Your *name*."

Another heartbeat. "Damien, miss."

Of course it would be. "That was my father's name," she said. Another loyal soldier of the empire, undone by the Sith.

The stormtrooper didn't have anything to say. She didn't mind. Morrigan closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and savored it. Only a few of those left; she was amazed Cade had lasted as long as he could.

They raced down the red stone corridor for the landing pad as quickly as they could. Gunner was up ahead, bellowing orders to anyone who'd hear, telling them to get out and board the assault shuttle, but the troopers were talking back, telling her the shuttle was *gone*, and they only had two ships left, and one of them was Gree.

Ania barely got that much. She had Maladi's knees digging into her armpits and feet sticking out ahead of her, and as she ran she kept looking back at Skywalker and Jao, who held the rest of Sith's weight between them. As he held on to Maladi's shoulders and face, Skywalker's face was twisted in ferocious concentration. His eyes had turned a terrifying red-gold and sparks of lightning danced from his palms across Maladi's clothes. The Sith woman's face had gone slack and the only reason Ania knew she wasn't dead already was that *they* weren't all dead too.

Jao, body twisted as he held Maladi up by the waist, kept muttering, "He can't do it much longer. She's almost gone."

Ania trudged ahead as fast as she could, half-dragging all three of them behind her. With Maladi's weight split the worst hindrance was Skywalker, who half-shambled as he struggled to keep the Sith alive.

When they finally breached the portal and went outside, Ania's first breath of Te Hasa's noxious atmosphere made her dizzy. Then she realized the chatter she'd heard was right: there was a gaping open spot on the platform where their shuttle had landed, and dozens of stormtroopers stood under the sun, confused as to what to do.

Thankfully, Jariah and Deliah had hurried ahead and were already lowering *Mynock's* entry ramp. They stood on either side, indiscriminately waving people inside. Some Imperials were even funneling into the Gree ship, and no one tried to stop them.

Ania, Cade, and Jao hauled Maladi toward *Mynock*. As they neared the ramp Gunner appeared, and she helped Jao

hold up the Sith's midsection as they hauled her into the freighter's hold. The space was already filling up with troopers, but they found a place in the corner to lay Maladi down. Cade went down with her, all the while still pumping dark healing energy across her body.

"We need to take off," Ania panted. "We need to--"

Gunner clamped a hand on her shoulder. "They're on it." Distantly, she heard the hum of warming engines and realized Jariah and Deliah must have hurried up to the cockpit.

Gunner pulled away and plucked a comlink from her pocket. Ania couldn't hear it over the din, but Gunner immediately lowered it, slapped Jao on the chest, "Tell them to take off! Take off now!"

"Got it," Jao announced, and dashed out of sight.

Ania watched, dazed by it all, as Gunner knelt down beside Cade and Maladi, held out the comlink, and said with sad eyes, "It's her."

Though the audio on her comlink scratched and background noise blurred her daughter's words, Morrigan could make out Gunner say, "We're aboard *Mynock* now. Getting ready to leave."

Weakly, head swimming with panic and the resurgence of Maladi's lethal poison, she asked, "Cade?"

"He's right here. We've got Maladi. She... doesn't look like she'll make it."

"Cade, can you hear me? Cade?"

Two heartbeats. Then she heard his voice, as pained as she'd ever known it. "I hear you, Mom."

"We can't disable the bomb. We don't have the equipment. Just go. Get clear *now*."

He didn't seem to have heard her. His voice strained, "Mom... Maladi... She can't hold on..."

"Just go," she said as the link drowned in static. As the connection dissolved to nothing she thought to say: "I love you both."

She said it. She'd never know if they'd heard. Likely they hadn't, which was fitting in a way; it was something she should have said far more early and often than she had.

Morrigan squeezed the dead comlink in her hand and looked at the young man with her father's name. He'd taken his helmet off, revealing a smooth clean-shaven face. His eyes were dark and afraid, and she reached across the grating to take his rough, warm hand. Then she closed her eyes and breathed deep. It was the simple things that mattered most, not the ambition and scheming. She'd taken too long to learn that, but at least she'd learned it. Late was better than never after all.

In the final moments, as the last spark of her life dimmed to nothing, Cade saw deep into Maladi.

He saw the girl she'd once been: Malincha, daughter of a Jedi, who'd watched her father fall before Darth Krayt's blade and buried grief deep within herself until she'd thought it gone. With the dark side as her tool she'd dedicated herself to seeking perfection: perfect knowledge, perfect control, perfect schemes and plots and poisons. At every step the Force had confounded her genius, always denying what she'd desired. In the end, with Cade's help, she'd realized that, broken, and sought to deny what she could not control. Unable to dominate the universe she'd worked to escape it. Maladi had called the Force's silence liberation, but in seeking it she'd been seeking the cold, empty freedom of death.

Cade saw and felt it all through a connection beyond love or hate, deepened by resonance. He understood all the drives Maladi had buried deep inside, but unlike her he'd unearthed them, faced them, and come to terms. When death's void swallowed her last spark, all his dark and desperate anger followed. An aching empathy replaced them, and when his senses returned Cade stayed where he was, exhausted, Maladi's cooling body clasped against his.

He became aware that he was on *Mynock*, and that *Mynock* was trembling as it climbed through the atmosphere. He lifted his head and looked around; stormtroopers, lots of them, all packed in his ship. Why weren't they in their own? He couldn't remember. He marked two brown Jedi robes among them, and a few Imperial Knights in their scarlet. Nobody he wanted to see.



Cade stayed where he was. He remembered what they'd left his mother behind down there, and that she hadn't been able to defuse the bomb. He'd rather have her body in his arms than Maladi's, but the two had been alike in their fashion. All their scheming, their ambitions, their dueling plots and secret lives had led both women to the same place in the end.

For a while, Cade stared at nothing and felt *Mynock* breach atmosphere and soar smoothly into space. As the ship stopped trembling, his half-sister crouched in front of them. The usual sour sneer was gone from Gunner's face; she more tired and vulnerable than he'd ever seen her.

"The baradium bomb went off," she explained. Her eyes were tilted toward the floor, staring into nothing too. "The Gree say they'll send down a recovery team to check the site... But we're pretty sure the explosion destroyed the entire facility. What wasn't destroyed got crushed beneath thousands of tons of rock."

"Okay," Cade said.

"Agent Corde... Our mother..." Gunner trailed off.

"I know."

"We didn't get any of her data. Maladi's. None of her research, none of those translated histories she was talking about..."

"I get it," Cade grunted, but that was a lie. He didn't 'get it.' Nobody did. Starting from scratch, it could take years to find an antidote to Maladi's virus, assuming there was one at all. The Jedi, Sith, and Imperial Knights had all gone functionally extinct. No one could predict what this would mean for the galaxy.

At the moment, hollowed by personal grief, Cade found it hard to care.

He pulled his body out beneath Maladi's and lay hers flat on the deck. Gunner held out a hand; Cade stared at it for a moment, then grabbed it tight and allowed her to pull him up. A handful of people had gathered to watch: he counted K'Kruhk, Azlyn, Lowbacca. No Sith, he realized dully. Probably explained the missing ship.

The Whiphid Grand Master shuffled close and lowered his shaggy head. "So this," he said, "is the author of our fates."

“She said she was gonna set us all free.” Cade’s voice cracked. “Damn Sith *cheeka*. She got her wish, didn’t she?”

Lowbacca gave a low roar and removed his brown robe. The Wookiee lowered it over Maladi’s body, hiding it from view. Something welled in Cade’s throat; it felt like a shroud for them all.

## Chapter Thirty

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Bacta was a miracle liquid, but it couldn't heal every wound. After removing Shado Vao from the tank aboard the Second Wheel, they placed him on a shuttle and ferried him to Coruscant. He had the entire inbound flight to review a written summary of the events at Te Hasa. The report was heavily redacted and much of it failed to make sense. He had no idea why Darth Maladi had permitted a single delegation to land at her secret base, and the specifics of the Sith Lord's death were unclear. It was said that her dying triggered a baradium bomb that vaporized the contents of the laboratory, and with it all her research, but nearly all of the second landing team sent to secure the facility escaped the explosion unharmed. Apparently they'd even brought Maladi's body with them. The only thing clear from the report was that attempts to procure an antidote to her disease had failed utterly.

More became clear once his shuttle set down inside the palace complex in Galactic City. Shado's welcoming party consisted solely of Azlyn Rae, who greeted him with a weak smile and quick embrace.

"You look like you're coming along," she told him after pulling back.

He wanted to tell her he wasn't, not at all. He still remembered the grim conviction that overtook him on Ord Mantell as the Mandalorians' laser-blasts tore through his flesh: death would be better than life without the Force. Nothing to have happened to him since gave argument. Still,

when he looked at Azlyn he saw her scarred face and the breathing apparatus plugged into the husk of her lungs. At Had Abbadon she'd been damaged far worse than he had, physically and mentally.

So instead he squeezed her arm with his one hand and said, "I'm trying to manage. It's been... difficult wrapping my head around everything."

She glanced at his other arm, terminated at the elbow. "You didn't ask the techs at Ord Mantell for a replacement? Or didn't you trust them to make a good one?"

"I'm... undecided if I'll get a new one."

She didn't argue, didn't ask questions. Something in her face suggested she was remembering Master Sazen, who'd lost his arm at Ossus and his life eight years later, during the final battle with Krayt. Sazen, at least, had been able to dissolve into the Force when he died. There's be no such relief for them, whenever that day came.

"You've read the report from Te Hasa?" she asked.

He nodded. "There's a lot I still don't understand."

"Let me give you the full story."

She held to his forearm and tugged him along. Shado followed her down the palace halls without question. His injuries and the Force's silence had cast a everything in a pall of futility, but curiosity was the one thing that still moved him. Azlyn pulled him into a lift that took them down twenty storeys, then directed him down another hall until they finally reached their destination.

It was a simple room, with windows looking out on Galactic City and walls framed by sofas and chairs. And standing in the center, meeting Shado's stare with an abashed look, was Cade Skywalker.

It couldn't be a Force-vision; Shado thought he was going mad. He looked at Azlyn and she gave him a nod.

"You're really Cade," Shado said, stepping forward, close enough to touch but afraid to.

"Stang, what'd you think I was?" He gave a rude grin; definitely Cade.

"I thought you were dead."

"I thought I'd lay low after dumping Krayt's body in a sun. But you know how my plans work out."

Shado reached out and clasped Cade's shoulder. The firmness of muscle and bone convinced him he wasn't mad after all. The dark pall around him seemed to lift, and it took him a moment to find the right words.

"I needed this, Cade. I *really* needed this."

"Yeah, no problem," Cade squeezed his shoulder back. He was doing a good job not looking at Shado's missing arm; Azlyn must have told him everything beforehand.

Shado, Cade, and Azlyn. They regarded each other warmly in the center of the room, and for a second Shado thought he'd recaptured some of the brightness of their shared youth, when anything seemed possible through the Force. Then their faces in memory clashed with the reality before him; Azlyn's was scarred, her body broken. Cade's was worn and weighted by too many sorrows, and even now couldn't quite escape its habitual sneer. In a way Shado has escaped the damage like they'd been dealt, at least until now.

The cleavage between past and present stole the reunion's brief cheer. They regarded each other from steps apart, faces sober. Then Cade said simply, "I've still got the Force."

It should have been shocking, but it wasn't. Shado recalled that the empress, too, had retained her abilities, and then starting falling into place. "You went to Te Hasa."

"That's right," Cade said grimly.

"Maladi wanted to experiment on you and see why her virus didn't work."

"Yeah."

"But why did you go? Did you think you could get an antidote out of her?"

"My mother. She was there."

More pieces locked together. There was a deep sorrow in Cade's eyes, and Shado asked, "Dead?"

Cade nodded.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"Yeah, everybody's sorry," Cade sighed, looked away. "We'd never have found Maladi if it wasn't for her. I don't know if that's even a good thing, given how it all turned out... But she did her part, you know?"

Shado couldn't read Cade's emotions through the Force, but in his eyes and face, his trembling voice, Shado sensed

none of the bottled-up, simmering anger Cade had long held toward his mother. Shado had never blamed his friend for that; Morrigan Corde, and Nyna Calixte, had done many things that were hard to forgive. He saw now that Cade had forgiven her and was grateful, at least, that his friend wouldn't have to carry the burden of hate.

He had enough to bear already, now that he was one of two Force-users left in the galaxy.

"So what happens to you now?" he asked Cade.

The other man shrugged. "I was gonna ask you the same question."

"I don't know. This situation is... unprecedented..."

"Yeah, I know. You guys might all have to get *real* jobs." Cade tried to smile, but nothing could make that joke funny.

Azlyn said, "The empress is supposed to make a statement soon, about... all of this."

"But what will she *do*?" asked Shado. "The Jedi Order makes up a third of the triumvirate. The Order... I don't know what it is now."

Cade sighed. "Back on Te Hasa, Maladi said she did what she did to *free* everybody from the Force. She said without it you'd have to discover what you really were. Experience, what did she call it, the agony of silence and the joy of rebirth." He shook his head. "But Maladi was out of her damn mind."

They thought on that grimly; Azlyn said, "I don't know what will happen to the Imperial Knights, but I want to keep being one, whatever that means now."

Shado was surprised; he'd known all about her conflicted loyalties. "You're certain?"

"I think so. Even without... even after all that's happened I still have obligations. But what about *you*, Shado?"

"I don't know." He avoided her eyes.

"Shado, listen to me for a second." She stepped close and grasped the bicep of his severed arm. "I always thought you were a *true* Jedi. When I thought what one should be- calm, brave, selfless- I always thought of you."

He wasn't in the condition to be flattered. "I really don't think--"

"She's right, you know," Cade said. "Azlyn, well, she's had her problems, and you know about me. But you always kept on the straight path. Pure Jedi, you are."

"*Were*," he said.

"Maybe. But if Azlyn's gonna try to still be an Imp Knight, you should keep trying to be a Jedi. You were good at it, Shado. Way better than either of us could hope to be."

Their eyes were intense, and he shifted uncomfortably. After Ord Mantell it was hard to imagine he could feel like a Jedi again, but he didn't know what else he could do. They were right; unlike Azlyn and Cade, being a Jedi was all he'd ever known. He'd never even imagined another fate.

"You never said what *you*'d do now," he told Cade.

Now it was the other man's turn to look down. "Not sure yet, but I got some ideas. Everybody's got something to carry. Especially me."

In the end, there was no choice but to come out with the truth. The obliteration of Maladi's lab on Te Hasa meant that all attempts to counteract her disease would have to start from scratch. The technicians at the palace were already working with the Jedi's best healers and scientists to evaluate the disease, comparing blood- and tissue-samples from every infected patient and comparing them to samples taken from the empress, as well as recent donations from Cade Skywalker and Ania Solo.

Their goal, in theory, was straightforward: discover why the midi-chlorians of those outliers were not damaged and use that knowledge to design a counter-agent. It was, of course, far more difficult than that. The virus had been engineered to attach itself to midi-chlorians, deform them, then die after accomplishing its task, thus limiting the chance of the virus mutation beyond Maladi's carefully-constructed parameters. There was no guarantee that damage could be undone; indeed, preliminary diagnosis was that the midi-chlorians of had been irreparably damaged. To fully search for a scientific solution to this problem, they were going to have to bring in outside help from the galaxy's best medical centers.

That wasn't Marasiah's only reason for making a public, official announcement. Rumors had been spreading across the news-nets since the Jedi and Imperial Knights had been placed in seclusion in the palace medcenter, and her father had taught her that the longer she tried to cover problems up, the wilder the rumors would become and the less likely people would be to believe the truth when it came out. Therefore she went before the assembled reporters in the palace's main audience chamber, accompanied by Admiral Stazi and K'Kruhk, as well as a set of Imperial Knights in full scarlet armor.

For the press she outlined the disease that had attacked the Imperial Knights and Jedi both. She said that the disease had been manufactured by Darth Maladi, one of the last renegade Sith. She explained how, despite the gracious assistance of the Gree Enclave, they had been unable to capture Maladi or secure her laboratory on Te Hasa. She insisted that a solution for this illness would be found, and that the triumvirate government had unanimously agreed to devote all funds necessary to researching a cure. In the coming weeks the best geneticists and disease experts in the galaxy would be sought and hired for their services.

That was the relatively simple part of the speech. Next came the hard one. Gesturing to the triumvirs standing on either shoulder, Marasiah said, "After extensive consultation with my fellow members of the Galactic Federation triumvirate, we have agreed that the current arrangement is not sustainable in light of recent events. Grand Master K'Kruhk has volunteered to withdraw the Jedi Order from executive decisions affected the triumvirate until the time comes when the Jedi can confidently state they are working the will of the Force. I'll let him say a few words."

Tense, confused whispers rippled through the audience in the five seconds it took for Marasiah to step off the podium and for K'Kruhk to replace her. Folding clawed hands in front of him, the old Whiphid said, "The Jedi have always sought to serve the greater galaxy. In nearly two centuries of life I have seen the Jedi Order take many forms. Sometimes it has served the government on Coruscant. Sometimes it has sought independence. In dark times, it was an active enemy



of Sith emperors. The Jedi are keepers of the peace. We are not rulers, and we joined this triumvirate reluctantly, for the sake of ensuring stability in the aftermath of Darth Krayt's terror. Empress Fel and Admiral Stazi convinced me that our insights into the Force were invaluable. We no longer have that insight. Until the day comes when the Force speaks to us again, the Jedi will recuse ourselves from government. We will still work with the Federation in every way and place ourselves at its disposal.

"Thank you for listening," K'Kruhk said, and when he stepped off the podium the audience welled up with questions. There were many ones they could ask: whether there would still be a Jedi Council, whether the new academy on Coruscant would remain open, whether all the knights and masters who'd been slowly rebuilding their order after Krayt's purges would even stay together, or scatter across the stars.

They were all valid questions, and Marasiah cut them off before they could begin. Neither she nor K'Kruhk had good answers for them. Raising her voice to drown out the chatter, she said, "In light of these events, I have another important announcement. Admiral Stazi and I have agreed to move up the timetable for elections of a new galactic parliament. We project that its inaugural session will take place within six months. We have also agreed that many former Alliance officials currently jailed or blacklisted will be released and freed to run for office, if they so choose. In this way we will create a government which all citizens can proudly claim as their own."

She said it with a smile, but it had been a hard argument, and she'd lost. She's told Stazi that, in light of the breakup of the triumvirate, it was all the more important that government on Coruscant be strong and centralized, and that suspected dissidents should be banned from seeking office. The admiral hadn't fought Krayt with his renegade fleet by being merciful to his opponent. He'd said that current events threatened confidence in the central government itself, and that the only way to salvage this unwieldy Federation was to appoint an empowered parliament where every vote could be seen to count, and every citizen could feel they had

a say in the collective enterprise. She'd argued such was a gateway to chaos; he said chaos was already coming and this was the best way to forestall it.

In the end, she'd given in. The Force gave her no guidance one way or the other, and she was too tired to fight.

After letting another round of murmurs subside, Marasiah said, "The Imperial Knights have served my family for half a century. They have been guardians of the noble spirit of the Empire, as remade by my great-grandfather Jagged Fel. They fought the Sith with unparalleled bravery and for that every citizen in the galaxy owes them respect. In their vows they swear loyalty both to myself, as monarch, and to the light side of the Force.

"Like the Jedi, the Force no longer speaks to them, but the Force speaks to *me*, and I will continue to lead them. I accept that some Knights may not feel comfortable serving, now that they are deaf to the Force. Those who wish to follow another path, or those new recruits who have not completed their training, will be allowed to resign. Those who wish to remain Knights, and I believe the vast majority will, shall continue to serve as my guards, agents, elite soldiers, and valued counselors."

Looking across the gallery, projecting strength like her parents had taught since she was old enough to stand, Marasiah said, "We face a challenge unlike anything we have faced before, but it is my firm belief we will overcome it. One day soon its voice will return to the rest of the Jedi and Imperial Knights. Until that day comes we will wait. The Force still speaks to me; I hear its voice and I will guide this galactic federation justly. The progress we've made in rebuilding the galaxy since the fall of Darth Krayt will not be undone. I will safeguard the peace of all with my life, as my father and grandfathers before me. Thank you for your time."

When she was done, Marasiah stepped off the stage without acknowledging the reporters baying questions at her wake. K'Kruhk, Stazi, and her Knights fell in behind her, and when they stepped into the dark, hidden space behind the stage, every one of them bled relief.

"I must admit," a weary Stazi said, "That went better than expected."

"We've only told them what they needed to know," said K'Kruhk. "The real difficulties will be in days to come. I wish we could do more to help."

"It was brave of the Jedi to know when to step back," Stazi said. "Brave and wise."

The Whiphid nodded his long face. Stazi's demeanor was respectful, on his face and in the Force, but he and Marasiah both knew that the entire governing structure of the Galactic Federation had been upended. Without K'Kruhk as a moderating influence, the differences between herself and Stazi would magnify. The bulk of the Federation's collective military was still Imperial, with Imperial admirals, Imperial ships, and Imperial soldiers, while Admiral Stazi's Alliance troops were segregated into their own units, answerable only to a triumvirate that no longer existed. Yet the promised senate would skew in Alliance favor. The Duro was a bold being, and Marasiah knew that if Alliance partisans became truly unhappy with her rule, he'd have a ready-made and very loyal war machine waiting in the wings.

She'd have to appease him. Allowing Alliance extremists into parliament was only the first step. Stazi would press when he saw his advantage, and she would press back, and somehow they'd have to refrain from breaking each other for the sake of this fragile peace.

She looked into the admiral's blunt green face and blank red eyes. He understood all the same things she did, and she forced a polite smile. "It will be difficult, losing Master K'Kruhk's wisdom. We should still seek his counsel regularly."

"I'm sure we'll have need of it," Stazi agreed, politely.

It felt strange that, after all she'd been through the past several weeks, Azlyn should return to the place where it all started. After the empress' public statement she went to the palace complex's medical wing, where every nurse and doctor she passed watched with questioning eyes. She walked quickly, ignoring them all, until she found the observation room where Ganner was staying.

She was surprised to find him not in a bed but a soft chair angled to look out the window. It was one of the rare days

when Coruscant weather control conjured rain over Galactic City, creating a suitably dreary backdrop.

When she stepped cautiously across the tile his head turned. "Azlyn," he said, "They didn't tell me you'd be coming."

"I didn't think I needed an appointment."

"You don't. I'm glad you're here."

His smile was weak, but seemed honest. She'd heard about what he'd done, or tried to do. He'd been kept in the medical center for observation since. He'd gotten paler; his face looked gaunt. Still, there was a light in his eyes as she came close and dropped into the seat next to his. Both chairs faced the window and she looked out at the rain-faded skyline. It would be easier than starting straight at him when they talked.

"I heard you went to Te Hasa," Ganner said. Despite his weak appearance his voice was strong.

"I wasn't much good there."

"I'm sure you did all you could."

She considered asking how much he knew; if he'd gotten the redacted version like Shado or if he knew the rest. Now wasn't the time to bring up Cade. Instead she asked, "Did you hear the empress' broadcast?"

"No. But Antares came here this morning and told me everything she'd say."

"Did he ask you what you plan to do next?"

"Is that what you came here to ask, Azlyn?"

She looked at his face's profile. "I wanted to see if you're okay. And if I could help. You helped me so much after Had Abbadon. I'll do anything I can to help you recover. Just ask."

"You shouldn't do something because you feel you have to."

"I'm doing it because I *want* to, Ganner. Because I care about you."

He continued to stare at the rainy city. Eventually he asked, "What are *you* doing now?"

"I still want to be an Imperial Knight, whatever that is now. I don't know what all this is going to mean for the galaxy, but I want to help with whatever comes next. Being a Knight, working for the empress... I think that's the best way to do it."

“You sound confident.”

“I’m not. I’m confused and terrified, just like everybody else. But I have to keep *doing* something.” She wanted to tell him that sitting around just made your worst feelings well up and consume you, but it was too harsh a thing to say. Besides, she imagined he knew already.

Ganner stared at the city for a little while longer, then said, “Okay. I agree.”

“You... agree?”

His hand lifted off the armrest, reached across the gap between chairs, and clasped hers. “We can keep being Knights. Whatever that means.”

He squeezed her hand softly; she squeezed back. She would have felt encouraged by that, but Ganner still stared out at the gray city, as though unwilling to meet her eyes.

Cade Skywalker had spent a good part of his life running from what needed to be done. At various points he’d denied it, raged at it, tried to cheat it and tried to hide, until he’d finally turned around, faced the dragon at his back, and done what he had to.

The compulsion this time wasn’t so strong. He didn’t have Force-ghosts of his ancestors hounding him to be a proper Jedi. He didn’t need them. The Force wasn’t nudging him along at all, not really. It was the knowledge that his mother had left some things undone, and he needed to finish the job for her.

Therefore, Cade went to Coruscant’s Jedi academy looking to talk with the Jedi Council, or whatever was left of it nowadays. The academy was housed in the old Jedi consulate he’d spent time in as a boy; the place had gotten a big ugly makeover from its Sith occupiers and over the past two years the Jedi- and Federation credits- had gone a long way to restoring the place to its former good looks.

Despite having been prettied up, the place radiated quiet misery. Cade felt it in the Force as he walked down its grand, near-empty halls. The collective desolation of all the Jedi was oppressive, like the misery Shado had emanated on a vaster scale. It took a lot of effort for Cade to shut it out; he knew how easy it was to get sucked into a black hole of

destructive self-pity, and right now it felt like the entire Jedi Order was getting swallowed by that singularity.

When he stepped into the Council chamber he immediately sensed that these Masters were controlling their feelings better. Ancient K’Kruhk and old sober Lowbacca contained their despair with many decades of experience. Little Tilli Qua, the Chandra-Fan who’d overseen the padawans back during Cade’s training days, reached for unlikely optimism. The younger Zabrak woman Soht Lenar gave off an impression of enforced tranquility; she was pulling hard on Jedi meditative traditions to calm her Force-starved mind. Rasi Tuum, Azlyn’s old master, emanated concentration fitting of a predatory Cathar.

“We’re pleasantly surprised you asked to see us, Jedi Skywalker,” Tuum began.

“Yeah, well, I figured you’d all drag me in here for a chat sooner or later,” Cade said. Nobody disagreed. “I’ll get to the point. I’ve got something none of you have got. I’ve let your doctors suck my blood so they can analyze my midi-chlorians and try and find a fix for Maladi’s virus. I figure whatever’s in my blood’s the same as what’s in the empress, so if they want a fresh supply to test, they can get it from her. That means I’ve got no reason to stick around.”

“Where is it you intend to go, Cade?” K’Kruhk sounded like he already had an idea. Even without the force these Jedi could be too perceptive.

“We talked about Khat Lah. Somehow, that Yuuzhan Vong found a way to use the Force even though he doesn’t have a drop of midi-chlorians inside him. I bet your scientists did all kinds of tests on him, right?”

“As much as we could,” K’Kruhk said. “Nei Rin found nothing biological that explained how he could touch the Force.”

“But he did. You’re absolutely sure.”

“I am. There’s never been an indication that the Yuuzhan Vong, or their life-forms, have ever possessed midi-chlorians. Khat Lah suspected that their entire race could once touch the Force directly, without the need for midi-chlorians. Their connection might have been deeper, more natural than ours, but they lost it when they were stripped of the Force.”

“Maladi said that she’d been going over lots of Gree archives on Te Hasa,” Cade said. “Those things were way, way older than the Jedi or the Sith, and there’s no telling how accurate they were, but she said that the Gree- and the Rakata, the Killiks, and all those other old civilizations- used to use the Force freely, until they began to lose touch with it. Gotta say, that reminded me of the Vong. Speaking of which, what’s happened to Zonama Sekot?”

“We’ve been in regular contact with the planet,” K’Kruhk said. “Zonama has been isolated since before Maladi’s disease spread. Our people there report none of the anomalies happening elsewhere in the galaxy.”

“Then there’s still Jedi left there,” Cade said with a little relief.

“Yes,” K’Kruhk said, “But for its own sake, the planet and everyone on it must be trapped in quarantine. No ship will be allowed to land. Those who leave can never come back, not until we’ve found a cure for Maladi’s poison.” The Whiphid shook his shaggy head. “As for her archives, we saw them on Te Hasa. Unfortunately, we didn’t have the time to save them. It was a grave loss, maybe as bad as losing Maladi’s research.”

“What do you suppose they contained?” chirped Tilli Qua.

“Me?” Cade shrugged. “Hells if I know. I’m not a historian. But I do think it could be relevant. Maladi was full *skocho loca* by the end, but that doesn’t mean she wasn’t on to something.”

Lowbacca howled a query, and Soht Lenar said, “Jedi Skywalker, what do you plan to *do*?”

He planted hands on his hips and took a breath. “Khat Lah’s out there somewhere. Maybe he can show you how to reach the Force without midi-chlorians, maybe not, but someone’s gotta go looking for him.”

The masters eyed him thoughtfully. Tuum asked, “Why do you think *you* should look for Khat Lah?”

Cade knew Jedi better than to expect a *thank you*. “I’ve talked this over with my crew. My brother Jariah, he used to crew with a Vong. Learned about all kinds of rare, weird weapons from that guy. There aren’t a lot of Vong wandering off Zonama Sekot and Jariah thinks his friend could point us

in a direction nobody else could. And frankly, I've been around this galaxy and can work my way into places your average Jedi couldn't."

There was more, obviously. His mother had risked everything trying to track down Maladi, and lost her life trying to save her laboratory and its data. Looking back he could see Morrigan Corde had made mistakes that had probably cost her her life. She'd refused Cade and Gunner's help because she didn't want to endanger her children, and she'd fallen into Maladi's trap because she'd gotten too confident or driven and let her guard down. Nyna Calixte would never have made those mistakes; they'd been made purely by Morrigan Corde, and Cade felt bound to correct them. His father had left him a legacy to be shouldered; so, now, had his mother. He hoped this one would be easier to bear. At least now he didn't have a horde of crazy Sith breathing down his neck.

"We recognize your expertise in the galaxy's darker corners," said K'Kruhk, "But what do you know of Khat Lah himself?"

"Me? Not well. He was close to my grandmother. That's got to count for something."

"Did you train him as your student? Did you learn his wants and anxieties?"

Cade swallowed. "Well, no."

"Did you spend hours discussing arcane facets of Jedi lore in an attempt to riddle out the truth of his people's Force-blindness?"

"Obviously not."

"And did you give him a list of worlds rich in Jedi history where he might search for some secret that, however unlikely, has evaded similar truth-seekers for countless millennia?"

"No. But listen, I—"

K'Kruhk heaved a sigh. "Cade, I wish I could search for Khat Lah myself. However, I am Grand Master of the Jedi and I cannot leave them in our time of need. The empress and Admiral Stazi will also need help in the days ahead. I can't abandon them now."

"Master, I get it. That's why I was offering. But if you can't come—"



Lowbacca released a trilling roar. K’Kruhk said, “I have already briefed Master Lowbacca on all these things. *He* will go with you. He has Nei Rin’s current location and suggests you start by speaking with her. It’s possible the master shaper has been in contact with Khat Lah.”

The Wookiee bore fangs; he looked fierce but Cade was pretty sure it was an imitation grin. “Wait a minute, what do you mean you *already* briefed him?”

“We were expecting to have to *ask* you,” Lenar said, smiling faintly. “Thank you for volunteering your services, Jedi Skywalker.”

Cade looked around the group. Even without the Force, these masters were too damned smart. “What would you have done if I just got into *Mynock* and flew off who-knows-where?”

“Then we’d have put together a team on our own,” K’Kruhk said. “However, consider. One who can still feel the Force. One who once knew its voice, but no longer can. A mission to find Khat Lah and unearth his secrets should have at least one of each, correct?”

“You got a point,” Cade admitted, and refrained from saying he’d had someone else in mind for the second part. He wouldn’t turn down help from someone who was old and wise but also strong enough to rip arms off a gundark.

Tili Qua asked, “When are you planning to depart, Jedi Skywalker?”

He shrugged. “Dunno. Couple days. I got a thing or two to take care of first.”

“We will make sure you have all the information you need before you go, and inform Nei Rin we’ll need her help.” K’Kruhk said. “Our scientists will continue to work here, but... a feeling tells me your search may be the most important one. May the Force be with you, Cade Skywalker. Once again, our fates rest with you.”

Cade nodded solemnly and refrained from telling the Jedi how much he *hated* them saying things like that. The worst part was, they usually ended up true.

Prostrate on his hands and knees beside Darth Talon, Eli tilted his neck up to watch Darth Nihl’s black boots pacing a

line in front of them. Beyond Nihl's feet he saw another pair, Darth Havok's, and beyond that the gray ferrocrete wall of Nihl's bunker. One short, wide window looked out on a gentle valley slope covered in green grass and lit by a clear blue sky, but that view was the only escape from the oppressive menace in the chamber itself.

"Without Maladi we have nothing," Nihl growled. "Lady Talon, you were *in* Maladi's laboratory when she died. Couldn't you do *anything* to keep her from killing herself?"

Head low, leukku sprawled on the ferrocrete floor in front of her, Talon said, "My hands were bound, and I was separated from her by fifteen meters' height. I'm sorry, Lord Nihl, but there was truly nothing I could do."

Nihl made a snarling noise and paced faster. Begrudgingly he said, "You were good to return to us. Even without the Force you could do that much. But we need *more*. The empress is doing everything she can to find a cure for Maladi's disease. If she's successful, the Jedi and Imperial Knights could regain the Force, and *we* would still be blind to it. That is unacceptable."

"We must insert an agent on Coruscant who can track their progress," Talon said.

"I *know* that," snapped Nihl. "I've already tasked Darth Havok with that. The question is what to do with *you*, Lady Talon. You were Krayt's most trusted Hand. Now I wonder if you're worth anything without the Force."

Glancing sideways, Eli saw his master tense. Pacing once more, boots slapping pavement inches from their fingers, Nihl said, "Until we recover the Force, we must all reevaluate our skills and redirect our priorities. The government on Coruscant will be weaker now than ever. We'll destabilize it further. There are Nagai here who would join us in battle, and I've been looking farther afield for more allies. But what place *you* will have in it, Lady Talon, I'm still trying to decide."

The pounding of feet just past his head had driven down Eli's nerves. He picked his head up again and said, "Lord Nihl, may I speak?"

Nihl stopped and glared. His eyes had red natural irises, almost like a molten dark side mark. "Go ahead, apprentice."

“Our mission was a failure, but not a *total* failure.”

Quietly, angrily, Nihl asked, “In what way?”

“May I rise, Lord?”

After glaring for a moment more, the Nagai said, “On your feet. Both of you.”

Eli and Talon rose as one. Nihl and Havok faced them imposingly, and Eli fought down anxiety and he stuffed hands into his pockets and drew out the datacards he’d grabbed from Darth Maladi’s laboratory.

Havok’s eyes went wide. “Is that Maladi’s research?”

“No,” Eli admitted, and both their faces went hard again. “There are translations of the ancient Gree archives on Te Hasa. They contain histories and lore that predate Jedi or Sith by millennia.”

Nihl’s face twisted. “*That’s* what you salvaged from Maladi’s lab? Stories? Myths?”

“My Lord, Maladi thought they were important. So did Darth Acheron. He commissioned these translations centuries ago.”

He didn’t know whether the name of long-dead Banite Sith would provoke admiration or scorn. Instead Nihl went thoughtful. “There may be some value in them. Or it may be impossible to pick out truth from the lies.”

“I know, Lord. But it *is* something.”

“Not enough.”

“He is right,” Havok said in a more measured tone. “It *is* worth reviewing.”

“Then we’ll review them. But it doesn’t answer what we should do with Lady Talon and her student.” Nihl fixed red eyes on the Twi’lek. “Do *you* have a suggestion?”

Eli watched Talon’s throat tighten. His master was struggling to bring words to the fore; finally she got out, “There is one more thing we can do.”

Nihl raised a black brow. “What is that?”

“We can find Khat Lah.”

Havok frowned. “Who or what is Khat Lah?”

Talon’s blue eyes shifted to Eli. “Perhaps you should tell them, apprentice.”

Eli had yearned to broach the subject of Khat Lah, but he’d been too intimidated. Nihl and Havok might still think him a

liar, but he launched into an explanation of the Yuuzhan Vong who'd become a Jedi. He omitted everything personal: the debt Khat Lah had owed Eli's father and the way he'd been captivated by the strange warrior as a youngling. He explained that the Yuuzhan Vong had somehow managed to connect with the Force despite having no midi-chlorians inside him. Zonama Sekot itself had chosen to restore Khat Lah's link to the Force, but apparently it was also related to the death of Jade Skywalker on Mustafar in the middle of the Sith-Imperial war. On mention of that both Nihl and Havok looked deeply interested.

When he finished his tale he stood before Havok and Nihl, awaiting judgement. Less angry and more thoughtful than before, Nihl asked, "Do you know where this Yuuzhan Vong went?"

"No. But I recall some conversations he had with Mast... with K'Kruhk before he left us."

Nihl did not let the slip pass. The Nagai stepped close enough to snort hot air in Eli's face. "You have embraced the Sith teachings. You've accepted your liberation from the arcane straits of the Jedi. Even without the Force you are *still* one of us, apprentice. Say it. *Say it now.*"

"I am Sith!" Eli snapped. "You- and Darth Talon- have opened my eyes, Lord Nihl. You've shown me strength the Jedi could never touch. You've let me unlock the power of my anger. I will always follow your path, Lord, and I will do whatever you say."

Nihl still glared down on him. "Do you wish to find Khat Lah?"

"Lord, he was already unlocking powers beyond anything the Jedi knew. That was years ago. What he can accomplish now... I can't imagine."

Nihl took a long step back, allowing Eli to see him in full. The Nagai said, "You will find Khat Lah for us. Your aim is not to convert him to the dark, though if that can be accomplished it would be a great feat. You need to learn how he can connect to the Force without midi-chlorians. We need that knowledge, desperately. And we cannot allow the Jedi or Imperial Knights to have it. Do you understand?"

Eli's heart lifted. He tried to keep joy from his voice as he said, "Yes, Lord. Absolutely."

"Good." Red eyes swung to Talon. "You will go with your apprentice. Find Khat Lah, capture him, and bring him to us. And make sure this young human does not stray from the path we've made for him."

Talon said, "By your will, Lord Nihl."

"Yes. By my will." The Dark Lord clasped hands behind his back. "Always by my will."

Ania had no love for Coruscant. Too many people, too much money, too many rules, too many people who thought their money made the rules.

The planet still had some uses, though, and while everybody was trying to make sense of the empress' stunning revelations, Sauk and AG-37 located a bank that would be quite willing to transfer the crates of hard bullion they'd been hauling around into liquid assets. Ania felt very strange walking into the slick, shining headquarters of a major financial conglomerate, wearing a formal suit she'd bought just for the occasional. Stranger still was walking out of the place holding a datacard with access information to an account with over five million credits.

Being rich beyond her wildest dreams should have made her feel better. As they took their rented landspeeder back to the platform where *Free Agent* was docked, Sauk sounded completely different from his usual dour self, and there was something ineffably upbeat in AG-37's precise speech. Ania couldn't share their happiness. Losing the Force had wrought unhappy changes in Kyra and Jao, which was bad enough, but her thoughts kept going further back, to the woman she'd left behind on Surcaris. No, best to put it plainly: the woman she'd run from.

Jao had been spending a lot of time in the government palace lately, probably seeking council from old teachers and friends in the Imperial Knights. Ania hadn't talked to him much since coming to Coruscant. Kyra was busying herself with doing repair and replacement work in *Free Agent's* systems, though she'd expressed frustration that without the Force she no longer possessed the seemingly-natural knack

for repair work she'd once had. She'd borrowed Skywalker's astromech to help with the operations, and when Ania returned from the bank she saw another landspeeder already parked at the landing pad. Then she spotted Deliah Blue's bright-pink form standing with Kyra and C-3PO beneath *Free Agent's* engine block and she figured Skywalker had come to finish the job and take his droid home.

Kyra spotted Ania, Sauk, and AG-37 after they'd docked their speeder and started across the platform. As they got close she asked, "How did it go?"

"Congratulations," AG-37 said, "We are all very rich."

Deliah smirked. "We've been rich since Soccoro."

"Yes," said Sauk, "But now that it's in the bank it feels more... official."

"Made progress?" Ania asked Kyra.

The younger woman shrugged. "Some. Deliah's been helping."

"We're almost good, actually," Deliah smiled encouragingly. "Force or no Force, the girl knows her way around a ship."

Kyra smiled awkwardly, like she wasn't sure if it was true.

Ania asked, "Where's Artoo?"

"Inside *Free Agent* with Cade and your *meeshku*." Deliah jabbed a thumb at the lower landing ramp.

"My what?"

"*Meesku*," C-3PO supplied. "A Huttese term of affection frequently used to denote a—"

"Alright, I get it. Except he's not," Ania wagged a finger at Deliah, then jogged to the ramp. Coming up it she nearly ran into R2-D2, who tootled as he rolled down onto the platform. Ania kept going into the ship, and she followed the sound of voices to find Cade and Jariah in the cockpit, on their feet with backs against opposite bulkheads, facing each other with guarded postures.

The moment she stepped inside they stopped talking and stared. Ania blinked. "Sorry. Am I interrupting?"

"No. Not really," Jao said. "Cade was just telling me about what he's doing next."

*Cade*, she noted, not Skywalker. Leaning against the doorframe Ania asked, "What's that?"

"We're going looking for Khat Lah," Skywalker said with a tone inviting comment.

It took Ania a second to come up with one. "Where are you even going to start?"

"We've got a couple ideas. There's a few more Vong floating around the galaxy we can check with. Might be a long, long search, but let's be honest. Somebody's got to do it. There's no telling if all those scientists they're bringing in are going to do the job, so the Jedi Council figured we've gotta explore all options."

"So the Jedi gave you this mission?"

"I suggested it to them, actually." Cade sounded slightly embarrassed. "They're sending Master Lowbacca along. You know, really tall and really hairy."

"That describes a couple Jedi Masters I've met, but yeah, I know which one. So you're going with Deliah and Jariah?"

"That's the plan," Cade said, but looked at Jao.

Ania looked at him too. He avoided their eyes and he had the expression of somebody who was thinking hard and didn't want to be bothered. Ania had seen that one on him before; it meant he'd already decided what he was going to do and was trying to justify it to himself.

"He invited you to go with him?"

Cade said, "I did, believe it or not. Figured we should have another ex-Force-user or two aboard and he'd cramp my style less than most." He shrugged. "That and I went to a couple old friends who turned me down. Not that I blame 'em. They usually get in trouble when I'm around."

"It seems like everyone gets in trouble when you're around."

He wagged a finger. "Hey, *cheeka*, you dragged *us* into your *poodoo* on Mon Gazza. And we got you rich out of it, so don't complain."

Cade was right; she really had no grounds to. If she hadn't run into him and his crew she'd be in prison again or fugitive in the backest of backwaters. Instead she was in the bright center, but she wasn't exactly pleased to be here.

"Jao, are you really thinking about this?"

Still avoiding her eyes, he nodded. "What's happened to us all... I can't just sit on the side and do *nothing*."

No, Jao had never been one for that. Because it was the right thing to do, he'd defied his Imperial masters and joined Ania on the quest for Darth Wredd. This was no different, but for some reason she felt personally slighted.

"Listen, I came here to make my offer and pick up my droid," Cade spread his arms. "Consider the offer made. I'm gonna go check on Artoo. You can hash this out."

He made for the exit, and Ania stepped aside so he could pass. Once he was gone she took up the spot he'd just been in, facing Jao across the width of the cockpit.

"You're going with Skywalker, aren't you?"

"Ania... I don't know what else I would do."

"I get it. Really. This Force thing... it's always been what guides you, right?"

"It has," he said firmly.

"Even when you're roaming around the galaxy with me, chasing rogue Sith Lord and ripping off pirates."

"Maybe." One side of his mouth tugged wryly.

"You know what I think?"

"What?"

"I don't think it was the Force leading you on. Not after we took care of Darth Wredd, anyway."

His eyes came up. He watched her very closely. "What was I after, then?"

She stretched her arms. "Excitement. I think you knew you'd get bored hanging out with your Imp pals."

He smiled, incredulous. "Really?"

She smiled back. "Oh, yeah. There's *way* more excitement on this boat."

"You have a point," Jao chuckled.

"Of course I do. Though from what I've seen of Skywalker, there's probably even more excitement on his ship."

"I'm not going with Skywalker for excitement. This time it's really about the Force. About getting it back."

"I know." Her smile wilted and something clenched in her chest. "So you're leaving."

"I... have to think about it a little more."

"Damn it, Jao, I know you. I know when you've made up your mind. You know..." She tried to get it out but couldn't.

"The whole crew's going to miss you. A-gee, Sauk, Kyra..."



The last name caused another tightening in her chest. Softly Jao said, "She deserves to know. And make her own choice."

This was too much; she didn't want to lose them both. On Esseles she'd been thrown into a rage at the thought of losing Kyra, the Kyra who existed in her head as a replica of herself who could still get through life without making some of Ania's mistakes. It had unlocked a possessive streak Ania hadn't known she'd had, and she felt shame in retrospect.

So even though her heart wrenched at the thought of losing them both she said, "You're right. You should explain it to her."

"Me?"

"You'd do it better than I could. Besides... I've got to think about my own course."

"What do you mean?"

She'd been considering her own fates, her own goodbyes. Because she'd been bracing herself for them she was able to take the loss of Jao and Kyra better than she otherwise could. Ania pushed off the bulkhead, gave Jao a soft smile, and said, "I'll tell you later."

She stalked out of the cockpit, hands clenched tight, legs pumping fast. When she neared the exit, light from outside blurred over the wetness in her eyes. She stopped at the top of the ramp, wiped them dry with her sleeve, and took a few deep breaths to compose herself. Then she walked outside.

Thankfully, Skywalker wasn't gone yet. He was with everyone else beneath the engine section, gathered around Deliah, who was using R2-D2 as a step-ladder while firing a welding torch inside an open access hatch. As Ania approached the big, happy group she forced a smile. "How's it going? Are we good to fly?"

"You've been good to fly," Deliah glanced down from her work. "I think I've just upped your fuel efficiency by a couple percentage points."

"Are we getting charged for this?"

"Think of it as a favor," Deliah glanced down at Kyra. "And a free lesson."

The younger woman smirked; it was an earnest smile, a nice change from the disappointment she'd had on display

lately. That was something else Ania was about to lose, and her heart twisted again.

She tapped Cade's arm and said, "Can I get a word?"

He was still watching Deliah, admiring. "Sure. What do you want?"

"Privately."

"Okay, fine." Cade turned away and followed her to the edge of the landing pad. "Hey, if this is about me stealing your *meeshku*—"

"Don't start." She put hands on her hips. "This is about something else."

"Like what?"

Ania took a breath. "I'm sorry about your mom."

Cade looked out at the city, uncomfortable. "Yeah. Me too."

"From all I've heard, she got herself killed trying to stop Maladi. And I was wondering if you weren't taking on this new mission as a way of, well, finishing what she started. Making peace with her memory."

Cade rankled. "That's a damn personal question."

"I know. But we are family."

"I thought you weren't big on family."

"I'm not. Wasn't. It's... complicated." She sighed and joined him in looking out at the endless spires, the endless speeder-traffic.

Eventually Cade said, "Maybe I am. I'm also doing it because I want the Jedi back. They're a pain in the butt sometimes and way too serious, but the galaxy'd be worse off without 'em. And because I've got friends- Jedi *and* Imp Knights- who need the Force back too."

"But if weren't for your mother... would the rest be enough?"

Cade stared at the skyline, arms crossed. "We'll never know, will we? What's with all the questions?"

Now it was Ania's turn to unburden. She said, "I just found out my mom's alive."

Cade turned, stared. "Huh," he said.

"That's why I got kidnapped by a bunch of Mandalorians. My mom's their leader, and she wants to oust Yaga Auchs, the guy in charge."

"Huh," Cade said again, then, "I thought your mom was dead."

"I thought so too. And she thought I was dead until a year ago. Then she had her people scouring the galaxy, trying to find me."

"So she had her bucket-boys grab you so she could, what, recruit you for a private war?"

"It's not like that," Ania said, but she wasn't even sure. "She has... a long history with the Auchs family, way longer than I've been alive. She used to be a Jedi, and it goes back to stuff she did then. She blames herself for the Yaga being in power. The way she sees it, she's trying to fix her mistake. Not just by killing him, but destroying everything he stands on."

"And what about you?"

"I don't know. I don't think she was... recruiting me exactly. I'm her *daughter*. If things had gone another way at the end of the war, things would have been so different for us both."

"But they weren't. Now you've both gotta live with it."

Ania knew that already. It didn't provide any answers.

Cautiously Cade asked, "Your mom... can she use the Force?"

"You mean is she part of the whole Skywalker thing? Yeah. She can."

"So there's four, then."

"Four Skywalkers left? Or four Force-users?"

He thought again. "Both."

"Everyone gets the fancy mind powers except for me, then. Not that I'm complaining. They seem like they bring a lot of trouble. It just feels... strange." In a weird way, Ania felt left out.

"The Force touches everything, even if you can't touch it back," said Cade. "Maladi went on about how there's something special about Skywalkers, like we were *made* to the Force to be its instruments of destiny. I thought that was *poodoo* once. I wish it were... but I think she was right."

His voice had gone soft. Ania didn't like the idea of some invisible power using her life, especially if she couldn't use it back. All she'd ever wanted was to keep moving, keep

acting, keep being free and never looking back, not in longing and not in anger.

It sounded like a nice life, but she'd never managed to attain it. Maybe it was time to stop trying.

"I think," said, "I need to go back to my mother."

Cade asked, "To do what?"

"I don't know. That woman on Surcaris was a stranger to me... but she shouldn't have been. I can't leave it like that."

Cade watched the skyline. Wind rustled his hair. Eventually he said, "You shouldn't."

"I figure I'll regret it if I do."

"Yeah," his voice cracked. "You will."

Departure was just before dawn local time. The sky over Galactic City started as violet and fell through red into gold. Spires obscured the horizon and hid the rising sun. Most had turned off their inner lights in anticipation of day, and from a distance they looked like a dark and jagged forest rising out of nighttime black. As their airspeeder docked at the landing platform, it was all Kyra could do not to stare.

She had been on Coruscant for almost a week and she still wasn't used to it. She'd heard of this place and seen holos of it, but she'd barely dreamed of seeing this trillion-person wonder for herself. She'd never allowed herself to hope. Very briefly she'd touched a power beyond her every dream. Then it had been stolen from her.

Now, maybe, she was going to get it back.

Once Ania locked their speeder into its docking clamp, Jao was the first one out. Her wore his white armor and carried heavy sack on his shoulder. Kyra's bag of supplies was about the same size, and Ania gave her a little help clambering over the rim of the speeder and onto the platform. Finally, all three of them helped C-3PO out of the speeder.

*Mynock* waited for them on the platform. Its landing ramp was down and two figures approached. They couldn't have been more mismatched: the tall, shaggy Wookiee raised arms and roared, while squat dome-topped R2-D2 whistled greetings.

"Goodness, how pleasant to see you both," C-3PO said.

"Yes, yes, Artoo, calm down. Of course I'm coming with

you. Mistress Kyra requested me. Besides, I couldn't let you run off on a mission like this by yourself. Someone has to keep you out of trouble."

The astromech made a rude blurring noise.

"What do you mean, you have to pull *me* out of trouble? I don't know what you're talking about. What's that? A droid factory? On Geonosis? I say, Artoo, I think *you're* the one who needs his memory recompiled."

R2's response sounded almost like a laugh.

Lowbacca trilled and reached for Kyra and Jao. He plucked the heavy packs of their backs with ease and began carrying them to the ship. R2-D2 and C-3PO followed in his wake, battering back and forth.

Kyra was glad to be free of that weight. She flexed her shoulders, then looked at the jagged Coruscant spires and the glorious sky a little closer to dawn. She imaged what new places she'd see on this journey, what fresh wonders, and hoped a few would be half as grand as this.

The sound of smacking bodies together interrupted her reverie. She looked to see Jao and Ania joined in tight embrace. They lingered, then pulled away, and then it was Kyra's turn. Ania hugged her just as firmly; they'd talked over their respective choices the night before, and it seemed to Kyra that her decision to go chasing a Yuuzhan Vong Jedi wasn't half as brave, or risky, as Ania's decision to go back to her mother.

When they released Ania kept a hand on Kyra's shoulder and squeezed it. "Be careful out there," she said. "Don't take risks you don't have to. And follow Jao's lead. He'll watch out for you and he'll set a good example."

"I know."

"Seriously. He's way more trustworthy than that Skywalker guy. And watch Jao's back like he'll watch yours."

"I will."

After a second's twinge of reluctance, Ania let go. Another Wookiee yell summoned them to the landing ramp; Kyra looked in that direction and saw Skywalker himself, half-hanging from a landing strut, messy hair blowing in the wind as he gestured for them to come.

Kyra and Jao walked forward. Lowbacca ducked into the ship, but Skywalker waited on the ramp and asked, "Said all your goodbyes?"

"We're ready to go," Kyra said firmly.

Skywalker gave her a hard, evaluating look. Then he smiled. "Yeah, you'll probably do. Not sure about that Imp you've got with you, but who knows? He might surprise me."

"I look forward to it," Jao said.

Skywalker snickered and walked up the ramp. Kyra and Jao turned back in unison for one last look at Ania, standing on the platform's edge next to her speeder. She raised a hand in a wave. They nodded back, then clambered inside the ship.

The landing ramp retracted right after they came in, and the engines started to warm. Lowbacca, still dangling a heavy bag off each arm like it was nothing, roared and waved toward them. C-3PO, standing in a corner with R2-D2 said, "Master Lowbacca wishes to show you the crew cabins you will be staying in. Please come this way."

Jao followed, but Kyra allowed herself to be drawn elsewhere. She hurried up the nearest stairwell, through the crew lounge, down the long hallway and finally to the cockpit. From this elevated angle the first rays of fresh daylight were stabbing out of the skyscraper forest. The violet in the sky was all gone, and soon red-gold would clear to cool blue.

"Glad you could join us, darling," Deliah said. The Zeltron was hanging over Cade's pilot seat, while Jariah worked the co-pilot's controls.

Kyra pressed herself against the back of Jariah's chair. Holding tight to its edges, staring at the bright day, she asked, "Where do we go first?"

"First we're gonna talk to Nei Rin," said Cade. "She's the best shaper off Zonama Sekot. She was close to Khat Lah and my father too. The Jedi say she's on Chasima, trying to undo the Vongforming damage from a decade ago."

"Plus we'll check in with my Vong pal Chonyo," Jariah said as he finished pre-flight checks.

"And where is he?"

Jariah chuckled. "We gotta find him first. Don't worry, I know some places to look."

“We’re ready to push out,” Skywalker said as he wrapped both hands around the control yoke. “You ladies are gonna want to strap into your seats behind you or hold onto something tight.”

“Always looking out for our welfare, *meeshku*, that’s you.” Deliah mussed his hair, then let herself fall into the nearest chair.

Kyra didn’t do the same. As *Mynock* pushed off on its repulsors she stayed standing for the better view. Morning light got to sharp it stabbed her eyed; then *Mynock* pivoted, and for a second she could look down and see the landing platform below, Ania a shrinking white-and-black mark on its edge.

Then the ship angled upward. Skywalker pushed the throttle and Kyra held on tight, still standing, still watching as they soared past the morning sky, into night-black space and mysteries unknown.







